

17 August 2021

The Hon. Alex Hawke MP
Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra, ACT 2600

Re: Protection for Afghan people seeking asylum and refugees on temporary visas in Australia

Dear Minister Hawke,

Today we write to you as the Co-Chairs of the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum (CAPSA) about the plight of people seeking asylum and refugees on temporary visas from Afghanistan, who are in Australia having sought our protection. We have also written today to your colleague The Hon Karen Andrews MP.

The Taliban's seizure of control drastically diminishes prospects for peace and security in Afghanistan within the foreseeable future. Ethnic and religious minorities such as the Shia Hazaras, women and girls, human rights defenders, ex-government officials, and local staff of Coalition forces, foreign embassies, and international NGOs are particularly unsafe and at risk of targeted persecution at the hands of the Taliban. Horrifying accounts are already emerging of atrocities including extrajudicial executions, and the forced marriage of women and girls.

In light of these developments, we welcome the Australian Government's ongoing efforts to evacuate locally engaged employees (LEE) and humanitarian visa holders currently in Afghanistan. We also acknowledge reports that the Government is considering prioritising refugees from Afghanistan in the 2021-2022 annual humanitarian intake, and we support calls for a scaled-up allocation of places.

As the situation on the ground in Afghanistan deteriorates, the Afghan diaspora in Australia is suffering acutely from afar. People seeking asylum and refugees on temporary visas are in situations of particular vulnerability, having lived in limbo in Australia for up to ten years, often enduring protracted separation from loved ones. Now, many fear that they may be forced to return to certain persecution under the Taliban regime when their visas expire. Others are crippled by the hopelessness of watching parents, spouses, siblings, and children struggle to survive under or flee from the Taliban.

We welcome the Government's announcement this afternoon that "no Afghan visa holder currently in Australia will be asked to return to Afghanistan while the security situation remains dire," and that "Afghan citizens currently in Australia on temporary visas will be supported by the Australian Government." We look forward to understanding and responding to the details of these announcements.

We strongly believe that the Australian Government can and should swiftly adopt the following **three additional measures** to ensure the safety and reduce the anguish of Afghan people seeking asylum and recognised refugees on temporary visas who are living, working, studying, volunteering

(including on the frontline of the COVID19 response), praying and nurturing families in our neighbourhoods and communities:

1. Provide permanent protection to the approximately 4,300 recognised refugees from Afghanistan who are currently in Australia on temporary visas. It appears abundantly clear that people in this cohort will be unable to return to Afghanistan in conditions of safety and dignity in the foreseeable future.
2. Provide people seeking asylum from Afghanistan who are currently in Australia with fair and consistent pathways to seek permanent protection, including by permitting people whose claims have been rejected to submit new applications for protection. We are aware that as of July 2021, there were approximately 330 people from Afghanistan in the IMA Legacy Caseload whose primary decision had been affirmed by the Immigration Assessment Authority (IAA).
3. Enable priority access to family reunion to refugees from Afghanistan who have been issued temporary visas in Australia.

We look forward to assisting you and the Australian Government in exploring and addressing the aforementioned measures, which have been discussed with and affirmed by Afghan diaspora leaders, including board members, staff and volunteers across our organisations.

On Sunday, Pope Francis asked Catholics around the world to join him in prayer for the people of Afghanistan.

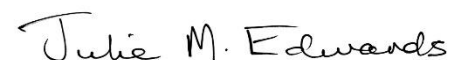
“I join in unanimous worry about the situation in Afghanistan. I ask you to pray along with me to the God of peace so that the clamor of weapons ends and that solutions can be found around a table of dialogue...Only this way can the battered population of that country – men, women, elderly, and children – return to their homes and live in peace, security and mutual respect,” he said.

We too hope and pray for peace, security, and mutual respect, but until then we must do all that we can to protect the lives of our sisters and brothers from Afghanistan.

Yours Sincerely,



Tamara Domicelj
Country Director, JRS Australia
Co-Chair, CAPSA



Julie Edwards
CEO, Jesuit Social Services
Co-Chair, CAPSA