

Afghan evacuees turn attention to families left behind

September 8, 2021

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Mustafa was back in Afghanistan visiting his wife and daughter when the Taliban literally moved in next door. He knew they had to get out of the country immediately.

But this time, he said, he wasn't leaving without his wife and daughter.

That harrowing journey took them two days just to get into the airport in Kabul; another two, to finally board a plane. It spanned three countries, with a stop in Qatar on their way from Afghanistan to the United States. It also meant a heartbreaking goodbye to parents, siblings and their families.

Mustafa, who asked to be identified only by his first name, still considers his family one of the lucky ones, able to flee Afghanistan before the Aug. 31 cutoff for the withdrawal of U.S. armed forces and allies from the country.

'The mission is not complete'

Now faith-based refugee resettlement agencies are helping people like Mustafa and their families settle into their new homes in the United States and advocating for those left behind.

"We remember the thousands of lives lost in the conflict in Afghanistan, including American service members, Afghan civilians, and others. But the mission is not complete," said Jenny Yang, senior vice president of advocacy and policy at World Relief, the evangelical Christian relief organization that assisted Mustafa when he immigrated by himself to the United States in 2017.

“The United States and the international community must do the hard work now of protecting and assisting those who cannot remain in Afghanistan safely.”

Mustafa, now 29, never wanted to leave Afghanistan, his family, his education or the small media company he founded with his brother. But after working as an interpreter and analyst for America and other international organizations, he’d received both direct and indirect threats against his life from the Taliban.

There were frequent clashes between the Afghan government and the Taliban, he said.



Families evacuated from Kabul, Afghanistan, wait to board a bus after they arrived at Washington Dulles International Airport, in Chantilly, Va., on Wednesday, Aug. 25, 2021. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

“All I remember in Afghanistan was war. I was born in war, raised in war, grew up in war. Part of my education was under the Taliban system a long time ago,” he said.

“When we are leaving our home in the morning, we don’t believe that we will come back alive in the evening.”

At the time, Mustafa said, the process of getting a Special Immigrant Visa, designed for Afghans employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government, was relatively quick and easy.

Not sure what to expect in the United States, he came alone in 2017, thinking his wife could join him in a few months once he had settled into the country. But the process “changed completely” after former President Donald Trump took office, Mustafa said, and her application was denied.

Forced to deal with the unexpected

He had started the process over and was visiting his wife and 1-year-old daughter in Kabul when the Taliban seized power several weeks ago. It was unexpected, he said. He never heard a single shot fired in the city.

When members of the Taliban began sheltering in front of their house, Mustafa, his wife and daughter went to stay with a friend who lived near the airport. He tried not to be afraid, he said, focusing instead on doing what he could to help his family.

He spent a day trying to get inside the airport, along with his brother and brother-in-law, who already were in the middle of the SIV process, and his father, who previously had worked with the British Embassy. But the scene outside the airport was crowded, chaotic and punctuated by gunfire meant to control the crowd, and he returned to his friend’s house that night, unable to get inside.

The next day, Mustafa made the difficult decision to part ways with his parents and siblings, telling his father he’d do all he could to get him out of Afghanistan once he had left. He couldn’t lose the chance to get his wife

and daughter out of the country, he said.

When he secured emergency visas for his wife and daughter and was told they could come with him, “that was the most beautiful moment of the story,” he said.

‘There are lots of other people like my family’

Once the trio made it inside, they spent two nights sleeping in the airport before they were able to board a packed military plane bound for Qatar in the wee hours of the morning.

After waiting seven hours on a hot tarmac for transportation to a shelter in Qatar, they boarded a second flight to Washington, D.C. They slept through the 14-hour flight, exhausted after their dayslong ordeal, and arrived Aug. 21 in the U.S., he said.

On Aug. 30, as the deadline for U.S. withdrawal closed in, his brother and brother-in-law still were waiting on a phone call from the U.S. Embassy telling them to come to the airport, he said.

“There are lots of other people like my family,” he said.

Faith-based refugee resettlement organizations—many of which urged the Biden administration months ago to begin evacuating Afghan allies before its planned troop withdrawal—have continued to advocate for those like Mustafa’s family who have been left behind.

Working as advocates

World Relief has resettled about 6,300 individuals with Special Immigrant

Visas in the last five years and has a lot of relationships with Afghans in the U.S., said Matthew Soerens, U.S. director of church mobilization for World Relief. Almost all have reached out to the organization in recent days “desperately concerned” for someone who is still in Afghanistan, he said.

“We are not moving past the reality that for the many who got out, who are starting to arrive, many others did not get out, including people who had pending Special Immigrant Visa applications because of their service to the U.S. military or other parts of the U.S. government. ... We do not consider that acceptable,” Soerens said.

Advocates aren’t sure what the process will look like to help those people continue to flee Afghanistan, which has become more difficult since the airlift ended. But that’s something the United States and other governments need to figure out, he said.

Organizations like World Relief, which form the backbone of the U.S. refugee resettlement system, also are working to meet the needs of Afghans arriving with SIVs or on humanitarian parole. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas has said the United States expects to welcome 50,000 evacuated Afghans through what it is calling Operation Allies Welcome.

Many remain in third countries undergoing security vetting and screenings before they can be admitted to the U.S.

Found a ‘very welcoming place’

Coming to the U.S. in 2017 was a tough decision, Mustafa said, because, “I had to leave everything back in Afghanistan and come back and start everything from scratch in the U.S.”

But he found a “very welcoming place” in World Relief’s resettlement office

in Modesto, Calif., he said.

The organization provided classes to help him learn about American culture and all the other things he needed to know about life in the United States. He remembers it helping other families to settle into and furnish housing.

Housing remains one of the biggest needs for evacuees arriving without the kind of credit history many landlords require, Soerens noted.

So far, more than 360 Afghan allies, most with SIVs, have arrived at World Relief offices across the country, he said.

The organization has been told to expect even more people to arrive with humanitarian parole status, he said. Many could have pending SIV cases. Others may be religious or ethnic minorities, women who sought education or people who served nongovernmental organizations with American affiliations.

Evacuees thoroughly vetted

Soerens said he has talked with former Homeland Security officials about the vetting process those evacuees are going through now in third countries. Officials are using the same biographic and biometric tools to vet people they normally would for the refugee resettlement process, he said. If there's any confusion about who a person is, he or she isn't brought to the U.S.

"We want everyone to be thoroughly vetted, and we have a great deal of confidence in the U.S. government's ability to vet people appropriately based on a really impressive record of doing so," he said.

Faith-based agencies are working quickly now to rebuild their capacity after years of cuts to the refugee resettlement program under President Trump. They're also raising funds and advocating for legislation to provide

the same assistance to Afghan allies that refugees normally would receive.

And churches have been quick to respond, according to Soerens. As of last week, World Relief's Chicagoland office received 800 inquiries from people interested in volunteering to help Afghans arriving in the area. In an average month, it receives about 25.

"We've been really, really thankful for the just unprecedented support from churches in particular, both in terms of financial support and volunteers," Soerens said.