

# Biden OKs new refugee funds amid criticism from aid groups

August 18, 2021

WASHINGTON (RNS)—President Joe Biden has authorized an additional \$500 million to aid refugees from Afghanistan, pushing through the funds as the White House fends off suggestions it failed a moral test to aid those fleeing the war-torn country.

Biden approved the funds in a memorandum Aug. 16 to meet “unexpected urgent refugee and migration needs,” drawing the money from the United States Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance Fund.

The memo, addressed to the U.S. secretary of state, stressed the funds were for “the purpose of meeting ... (the) needs of refugees, victims of conflict, and other persons at risk as a result of the situation in Afghanistan.”

The president of Jewish refugee resettlement group HIAS (founded as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), Mark Hetfield, said the move was expected and the fund exists “precisely for this type of situation”—referring to the effort to evacuate Afghans desperate to leave the country after it fell to the Taliban over the past week.

The White House did not immediately respond to questions about how the new funds will be used.

At a news conference Tuesday afternoon, White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters seven C-17 aircraft left Afghanistan over the past 24 hours, each carrying 700 to 800 passengers, most of them a “mix” of people from other countries and Afghans seeking a Special Immigrant Visa, or SIV, with the U.S.

Psaki also reiterated the claim that “a good chunk” of SIV applicants “did not take advantage of those visas and depart” before the Taliban took control of Kabul, as the president asserted in his Monday address on Afghanistan—although she did not specify how many.

On Monday, in response to Biden’s address, leaders of several faith-based refugee groups disputed this account, saying they spent months urging the White House to expedite the evacuation of Afghans who aided the U.S. government during its 20-year presence in the country.

“We have been in touch with countless SIV recipients who have been desperate to leave Afghanistan for months and have not been able to due to insufficient financial resources and inadequate flight accessibility through international organizations,” Krish O’Mara Vignarajah, head of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, said on Monday.

Similarly, Hetfield described Biden’s assertion as a case of “blaming the victim.”

On Tuesday, faith-based groups continued their pressure on the White House to help U.S. allies and other vulnerable Afghans, including Christians and other religious minorities.

Among them, the Evangelical Immigration Roundtable sent a letter to Biden signed by leaders from World Relief, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, the National Association of Evangelicals, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention and the National Latino Evangelical Coalition.

“As Christians, we believe that each person is made with intrinsic value in the image of God, and we cannot treat any person’s life as expendable. Our government has a particular obligation to those who are now facing threats upon their lives due to their service to the United States, and to go back on our commitment to them would be a moral failing with reverberating

consequences for decades to come," the letter read in part.

*Emily McFarlan Miller reported from Chicago.*