



August 15, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC
20006

**Re: The White House must change course to prioritize human rights
in Afghanistan**

President Biden:

We write to express our alarm over the unfolding crisis in Afghanistan and your administration's failure to protect the human rights of that country's most vulnerable people as the U.S. completes the withdrawal of its military forces. For nearly 20 years, U.S. presidents have boasted of their commitment to championing the rights of all Afghans. The White House's sluggish response to the events of the previous weeks has exacerbated a worsening human rights crisis.

In just over one week, the Taliban's forces have secured massive gains across the country, capturing over half of Afghanistan's provincial capitals. Between 1996 and 2001, the Taliban government [subjected women and girls](#) to draconian controls and deprived them of their rights to education, medical care, freedom of movement, and in many cases, their right to life. In the ever-growing swathes of the country under Taliban control, these [abuses continue today](#). The Taliban has a well-documented record of deliberately [killing civilians](#), [orchestrating violent reprisals](#) against their critics, and demonstrating a callous [disregard for human life](#).

This new phase of the conflict has rapidly accelerated Afghanistan's humanitarian catastrophe. Even before the Taliban's recent offensive, nearly [four million Afghans](#) were internally displaced, equivalent to the population of Los Angeles. Since May, their numbers have ballooned further. Displaced Afghans live lives of [staggering](#) privation, often lacking access to sanitation, clean water, medical assistance, economic employment, or adequate shelter. As the Taliban has seized border posts and neighboring countries have moved to close their frontiers, Afghan civilians remain trapped.

Efforts undertaken by the administration to press Afghanistan's neighbors to open their borders to fleeing refugees have been plainly inadequate. According to media reports



and observers in Afghanistan, neighboring countries are [erecting border fencing](#) and [throttling Afghans' ability to seek shelter](#). Few countries are granting visas from their embassies in Kabul to individuals with a well-founded fear of persecution.

If Afghanistan is to one day see a new dawn, that dawn will be brought forward through the efforts of the country's human rights defenders, including women's rights activists, journalists, and other Afghans of conscience. Our organizations have [documented](#) and supported the tremendous contributions these individuals have made to advance human rights and freedom in their country. We have likewise [documented](#) the dangers they face.

Earlier this month, we recognized the White House's decision to extend Priority 2 designation status to qualifying Afghans whose safety may be at risk, including employees of non-governmental organizations and media organizations, as a valuable first step. Since that time, the conflict has accelerated, and it has become clear that this move is insufficient. In many cases, Afghans qualifying for Priority 2 designation lack the means or ability to exit the country and have no viable pathway to safety. To leave them to their fates is a policy choice with horrific consequences for Afghanistan's future and would scupper any human rights progress made over the previous two decades.

Other Afghans at risk include those who provided services or assistance to the U.S. and other foreign governments in Afghanistan. Their numbers include civil engineers, interpreters, clerks, drivers, and numerous other individuals who have aided international powers either individually or on behalf of their employer. They and their families are at grave risk of retaliation from the Taliban. The Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) program designed to facilitate their exit from Afghanistan suffers from [backlogs](#) which will only be exacerbated as the U.S. reduces its diplomatic presence in the country.

We urge you to promptly:

- provide for the prompt evacuation of Afghan civil society workers, journalists, activists, rights defenders, SIV candidates, and other vulnerable individuals who request it to the United States or to a safe third country pending the adjudication of their applications;
- use every diplomatic avenue available to press Afghanistan's neighbors to open their borders to refugees;
- work with the United Nations and the international community more broadly to stand up an infrastructure for humanitarian assistance that can address this developing crisis; and
- lay the groundwork for genuine accountability by pressing for an unbiased and independent inquiry into abuses committed in Afghanistan by all parties to the conflict.

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The current policy, as implemented by the White House, imperils the people of Afghanistan. We call on you to change course with urgency. The cost of a failure to act will be denominated in human lives.

Paul O'Brien
Executive Director
Amnesty International USA

Michael J. Abramowitz
President
Freedom House