

GERALD E. CONNOLLY
11TH DISTRICT, VIRGINIA
2238 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
(202) 225-1492

FAIRFAX OFFICE:
4115 ANNANDALE ROAD
SUITE 103
ANNANDALE, VA 22003
(703) 256-3071

PRINCE WILLIAM OFFICE:
2241-D TACKETT'S MILL DRIVE
WOODBIDGE, VA 22192
(571) 408-4407

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4611

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

SUBCOMMITTEE:

CHAIRMAN, GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

PRESIDENT, NATO

PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

SUBCOMMITTEES:

MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND GLOBAL
COUNTERTERRORISM

ASIA, THE PACIFIC,
CENTRAL ASIA, AND NONPROLIFERATION

Dear Director Jaddou,

I write to express my concern for the delays and obstacles that have impeded many Afghan nationals fleeing danger and violence from seeking entry into the United States. The current process encourages at-risk Afghans, many of which already qualify for an immigrant visa or await Chief of Mission approval for their SIV application, to apply for a humanitarian parole, a separate process that authorizes entry to the United States on a case-by-case basis.

Before and after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, my office worked closely with local organizations, resettlement agencies, and the State Department to assist countless Afghans forced to flee their country. In the days leading up to the U.S. withdrawal, my office submitted over 20,000 names to be processed by the State Department to assist courageous individuals facing serious and credible threats, including human rights defenders, LGBTQI+ individuals, journalists, women and girls, translators, and employees that assisted the U.S. during our 20-year presence, find safety. Unfortunately, many of these individuals, especially those awaiting approval for humanitarian parole, still anticipate excessive bureaucratic obstacles and delays that stymie their escape from danger in Afghanistan and seeking entry into the United States.

I am concerned that USCIS has developed a process that diverts applications into a humanitarian parole category that has subsequently been unable to handle the sheer volume of humanitarian parole applications it has received. A spokesperson for USCIS, noted that out of the near 45,000 humanitarian parole applications USCIS has received since July, roughly 2,200 applications have been denied or administratively closed, and only 270 have been conditionally approved as of the date of this letter.¹ That would suggest approximately 5% of all applications have been processed, with only a .6% approval rate. I commend the work of USCIS and the State Department in processing more than 70,000 at risk Afghans, but this lack of progress with humanitarian parole applications leaves thousands of Afghans without legal immigration status and effectively denies them the ability to appropriately coordinate safe passage outside of Afghanistan and potentially into the United States.

USCIS must review the requirements for documentation from a credible third-party source that identifies what harm an individual faces and its imminence. Some refugee advocates have cited unrealistic standards: For example, USCIS has rejected some Afghans who have received threatening letters from the Taliban or belong to a vulnerable group targeted by the Taliban.² Afghanistan has only vaccinated 8% of its population, and with a health care system nearing collapse, requiring proof of vaccination creates a

¹ Dan De Luce, "Afghans subject to stricter rules than Ukrainian refugees, advocates say," *NBC News*, April 29, 2022

² *ibid*

potentially unsurmountable burden thwarting imperiled Afghans from reaching safety.³ Additionally, in a country with an economy in freefall and a median annual per capita income of \$400, paying the \$575 administrative fee could be the difference between an Afghan national feeding their family and applying for a program that has only processed 5% of all applications. I encourage you to consider waiving the \$575 administrative fee for Afghan nationals applying for humanitarian parole or any other programs that would allow them to evade danger and resettle in the United States.

Northern Virginia has welcomed Afghans as important contributing members to our region, and we owe it to those that helped the United States and our allies to develop a streamlined process for application and adjudication. I look forward to your response addressing how USCIS intends to address the humanitarian parole backlog and remove ancillary bureaucratic obstacles that impede at-risk Afghans from seeking refuge in the United States.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gerald E. Connolly", with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress

³ David Zucchino and Safiullah Padshah, “Afghanistan’s Health Care System Is Collapsing Under Stress,” *New York Times*, February 6, 2022



**U.S. Citizenship
and Immigration
Services**

June 1, 2022

The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Connolly:

Thank you for your April 13, 2022 letter to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) regarding humanitarian parole cases for Afghan nationals. Secretary Mayorkas asked that I respond on his behalf.

We appreciate your interest in supporting Afghan nationals and acknowledge your concerns about denials of humanitarian parole applications, third-party documentation requirements, filing fees, and the processing times for these applications.

As you know, the Department of Homeland Security has been supporting a whole of government response to ensure that Afghan nationals who have assisted us and our allies are protected. Through expedited processing of Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) at safe havens, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) adjudicated work authorization applications and facilitated access to social security cards for over 71,000 Afghan evacuees. USCIS engagement with interagency partners and resettlement community stakeholders promoted development of streamlined procedures to support replacement or corrections to employment authorization documents, Form I-94s, and social security cards for OAW applicants. These efforts also facilitated thousands of Afghan evacuees' access to critical benefits, including Medicaid, SNAP and TANF. Efforts continue as USCIS supports contracts for "Afghan Community Integration Support Services" to help Afghan evacuees integrate successfully and safely into communities across the United States. Thus far, through collaboration between USCIS, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and other federal government partners, such "Welcome Centers" have provided on-site services and referrals in targeted locations to thousands of resettled Afghan nationals, ensuring individuals and families have access to federal/state/local benefits that they qualify for, and remain connected to federally-funded resettlement networks. To date, such Welcome Centers offered services in California, and are slated to provide similar support in the Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia area in July. USCIS will notify you of the details for the Welcome Center slated for Northern Virginia as soon as possible.

In reference to your specific concerns about humanitarian parole, USCIS has received over 45,000 parole requests on behalf of Afghan nationals since last summer's evacuation of Afghanistan began, compared to an average of approximately 1,500 to 2,000 receipts for all nationalities in prior years. USCIS has worked quickly to increase processing of parole requests, including increasing the number of staff working on parole cases by nearly nine-fold, with approximately 90 staff now assisting with this surge in requests. The vast majority of these staff have been diverted from other USCIS workloads to assist with parole, and all staff receive a 3-week specialized training on parole before they can begin adjudicating parole cases. Normally, our processing time targets are to complete at least 90 percent of all parole requests within 90 days of receipt, not counting any delays caused by the petitioner or external vetting. Due to the unprecedented number of parole requests we have received since last summer, however, petitioners should expect to wait significantly longer than 90 days for their parole request to be processed.

In adjudicating requests for parole, USCIS considers additional strong positive factors for the Afghan population, which are included in the eligibility section of our Afghan parole information webpage.¹ USCIS provides additional guidance on the type of evidence that is required for certain types of parole requests from all nationalities on our website as well.² USCIS adjudicators consider all information submitted by the petitioner, as well as any other relevant evidence available to us, to weigh the positive and negative factors to determine whether the beneficiary merits a favorable exercise of discretion to authorize parole.

Please note, however, that parole is not intended to replace established refugee protection mechanisms, such as local protection and, where applicable, referral to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) for resettlement. In some limited circumstances, protection needs are so urgent that obtaining protection via USRAP is not a realistic option. This, along with all other positive and negative factors that are relevant to the case, is taken into consideration when USCIS assesses whether there are urgent humanitarian or significant public benefit reasons to grant parole and whether the individual warrants a favorable exercise of discretion.

Please be assured that the U.S. Government continues to explore options to best serve at-risk Afghan nationals through a number of mechanisms, including increasing refugee processing, efficiently processing applications for Afghan nationals who may be eligible for a SIV, and expediting processing of family-based petitions and immigrant visa petitions filed on behalf of Afghan nationals. We recognize that your constituents find these issues important, and we would be grateful for any efforts by your office to communicate this information about the various options available for Afghan nationals to safely resettle in the United States.

¹ <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/humanitarian-parole/information-for-afghan-nationals-on-requests-to-uscis-for-humanitarian-parole>.

² <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/humanitarian-parole/guidance-on-evidence-for-certain-types-of-humanitarian-or-significant-public-benefit-parole-requests>

The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly
Page 3

Thank you again for your letter and interest in these important issues. Should you require any additional assistance, please have your staff contact the USCIS Office of Legislative Affairs at (240) 721-3801.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ur M. Jaddou", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ur M. Jaddou
Director