

## **Joint Statement on the closure of the Special Immigration Measures program for Afghan Nationals**

June 15, 2022

As a broad coalition of organizations working to support Afghans affected by the humanitarian and human rights crises gripping Afghanistan since the August, 2021 takeover by the Taliban regime, we are deeply troubled by recent reliable reports that Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada plans to discontinue the [Special Immigration Measures](#) program established to help those Afghans who are especially vulnerable because of having worked for Government of Canada funded projects.

Such a decision would leave thousands at high risk of Taliban violence - not least those who worked to advance gender equality under Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy. Those same men and women are living in fear precisely because their support for Canada's mission in Afghanistan makes them targets for violent retribution by the regime.

Last week, the parliamentary Special Committee on Afghanistan, to which many of us provided testimony, released a [series of recommendations](#) relating to the streamlining of IRCC programs and the need for increased resourcing to ensure our obligations to our Afghan allies are met. We are concerned that, if the closure of the SIM program were to proceed at this time, instead of measured engagement with the Special Committee report, the Government of Canada will convey a message ignoring the constitutional role of Parliament to scrutinize and hold government accountable, while seeking to quietly cast aside a core program of its Afghanistan response. Specific commitments for the resettlement of Afghans, including those eligible for the SIM program, were offered as a core pledge of the campaign with which the current government was reelected last September; these commitments were made not only to the Afghan people, but to the Canadian public, including those Afghan-Canadians who voted on the basis of these promises. To rescind the SIM program now would be a violation of these publicly stated commitments.

The SIM program has already been plagued by a [lack of transparency](#) over qualification criteria and the processing of applicants, and if the doors to this pathway to safety are closed now without further review, this will also convey a disappointing lack of political will and global leadership. Only a small fraction of people who meet the criteria for the SIM program have

received any response at all, let alone making it safely to Canada. Of the publicly stated [commitment to resettle 18,000 SIM applicants](#), thus far [less than 7,000](#) have safely arrived in Canada.

Many more qualified candidates who tried to apply to this program since August 2021 have been met either with silence or impersonal, automatic replies. Meanwhile, they are forced to hide in their homes or move regularly between secret locations to protect themselves and their families, facing the uncertainty and fear of continually being targeted for the often very public roles they played in championing values we share - those of inclusion, democracy and equality. Others who have been fortunate enough to make it to a third country, nonetheless remain there in limbo, with no means to support themselves and no information provided by IRCC on the status of their applications to the SIM program. One individual who has been waiting in hiding for 10 months to hear of a decision, shared:

*While I am proud of my contributions to these important [Government of Canada] initiatives, which changed the lives of many Afghans and worked to realize Canada's objectives in Afghanistan, I have been living in a state of constant anxiety and disappointment since August 6, 2021 when I received the first of many IRCC auto-replies. I can't ever go very far away from my home due to risks of being followed and arrested by the Taliban for my key role in implementing Canada's education programming for girls and gender equity. I am worried for the future of my children, especially my three-year-old daughter, who is in a country where girls' rights are now finished.*

This applicant reflects the experience of many many more, who are losing hope and now fear being left behind entirely should the SIM program be discontinued. A decision by the Government of Canada to abruptly end this program will literally leave lives and futures hanging in the balance.

We strongly urge IRCC, Minister Fraser, and Prime Minister Trudeau to extend the program by a further 12 months with a new, additional allocation of spaces to allow a maximum number of vulnerable Afghans who have supported Canada and who do not have the means to access other pathways, to reach safety in Canada. We echo the call of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for extending the special immigration measures afforded to Ukrainian nationals, and those of the Special Committee on Afghanistan to streamline access to the SIM program for qualified Afghan applicants. The numbers committed for the SIM program for Afghans are *in addition to* existing allocations for Government Sponsored Refugees, and for

those fleeing conflict in Ukraine, for which other pathways have been established. Canada has the capacity to fulfill its promises on all these programs, and Canadians across the country not only strongly support the program, but stand ready to welcome and support Afghans as they arrive.

It is now time for Canada to make good on the global leadership promises made during last year's federal election campaign, and to act swiftly to bring those at-risk Afghans to safety. Let us not leave behind the people we once needed who now need us.



[Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan](#)



[Afghan Youth Engagement and Development Initiative](#)



[Canadian Federation of University Women](#)



[Afghan Women Center of Montreal](#)



[Northern Lights Canada](#)



[Women Living Under Muslim Laws](#)



[Canadian International Learning Foundation](#)



[Hazara Women Organization](#)



[Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services \(CHHS\)](#)