

Lawmakers urge Biden to evacuate Afghan allies 'immediately'



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Afghan security personnel inspect the site of a bomb explosion in Kabul, Afghanistan, Thursday, June 3, 2021. | Rahmat Gul/AP Photo

A bipartisan group of lawmakers urged President Joe Biden to immediately evacuate the thousands of Afghans who worked closely with the U.S. government over the past 20 years and will likely be punished by the Taliban once the last American troops leave the country this summer.

In a [June 4 letter obtained exclusively by POLITICO](#), lawmakers led by Rep. [Seth Moulton](#) (D-Mass.) wrote that they are "increasingly concerned" that the administration has not yet mobilized the Pentagon to help protect Afghan allies. The State Department's current plan to approve special immigrant visas allowing thousands of Afghans to enter the United States is moving too slowly to avert the coming crisis, they said.



“Our Afghan friends and allies are at greater risk than ever before,” the lawmakers wrote in the letter. “If we fail to protect our allies in Afghanistan, it will have a lasting impact on our future partnerships and global reputation, which will then be a great detriment to our troops and the future of our national security.”

The letter landed on Biden’s desk just days after the administration held a classified call to provide an update to congressional staffers on the special immigrant visa program, according to congressional aides.

The latest criticism reflects the sense on Capitol Hill that the Biden administration is not doing enough to safeguard thousands of Afghan citizens who helped U.S. and NATO forces.

The State Department has in recent weeks identified “process improvements” and directed additional resources to the program, including increasing staffing in Washington and in Kabul to process SIV applications, spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Thursday.

“We understand and we recognize that we have a special commitment and a special responsibility to the many Afghans who, over the years, have at great risk to themselves and even to their families — have assisted the United States in our efforts in Afghanistan,” Price said. “We are always seeking ways to improve the SIV process while ensuring the integrity of the program and safeguarding our national security and affording opportunities to these Afghans.”

A number of House lawmakers from both parties signed onto the letter, including Reps. [Jason Crow](#) (D-Colo.), [Michael Waltz](#) (R-Fla.), [Joe Courtney](#) (D-Conn.), [Don Bacon](#) (R-Neb.), [Ruben Gallego](#) (D-Ariz.), [Peter Meijer](#) (R-Mich.), [Adam Schiff](#) (D-Calif.) and [Tom Malinowski](#) (D-N.J.).

Roughly 16,000 SIVs have been issued since Congress set up the program in 2009; another 18,000 applications are in the pipeline and need to be processed before the withdrawal, lawmakers wrote. It takes the State Department an average of more than 800 days to process a special visa — far too long, considering the U.S. military is scheduled to leave Afghanistan in less than 100 days, they wrote.

At the request of the administration, [lawmakers introduced legislation to streamline and accelerate the process](#) by raising the visa cap and waiving the medical exam requirement, the lawmakers wrote. But even with those changes, the SIV application backlog is likely to keep growing, they said.

“In the past month, we have been closely following your developing withdrawal plans. We appreciate the

complexity of ending the War in Afghanistan, but we are increasingly concerned that you have not yet directed the Department of Defense be mobilized as part of a concrete and workable whole of government plan to protect our Afghan partners," the lawmakers wrote.

The lawmakers called on Biden to establish an interagency task force responsible for the visa management and evacuation of these Afghans before the end-of-summer U.S. withdrawal, and to explore using Guam as a temporary evacuation site before moving the refugees to more permanent locations within the United States.

The Pentagon has said that it is [not currently planning for an evacuation](#) of these Afghans, but that the option is one of many being considered.

The lawmakers noted that the United States has conducted evacuations before at a far greater scale, citing the removal of 130,000 Vietnamese refugees after the fall of Saigon in 1975. The refugees were held temporarily in Guam before being transported to the United States to finish visa processing.

James Miervaldis, chairman of the advocacy group No One Left Behind, noted that the State Department last year carried out the evacuation of 100,000 American citizens from various countries around the world at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

While officials have told Miervaldis that evacuating the Afghan refugees to Guam is "not a realistic policy," his group has been working with the administration to explore temporary options such as the UAE, Qatar and Kuwait.

"The frustrating thing is just that we are seeing exactly no movement, and here we are in the 11th hour," Miervaldis said. "There is unprecedented bipartisan support for our allies and yet we are waiting on the White House to move."

The June 4 letter follows an April 21 letter seeking the president's commitment to expedite the visa approval process and address challenges with the Afghan refugee program. The administration did not formally respond to the letter, prompting lawmakers to publicly condemn its apparent [lack of urgency](#).

"The day the last U.S. soldier goes wheels up out of Bagram air base, we've handed these people a death sentence," Waltz, a former Green Beret who worked with Afghan interpreters during his deployment, said in an interview at the time.

If the administration decides to use Guam as a temporary evacuation site, the lawmakers recommended the task force develop a "robust" vaccination and housing plan to protect the refugees and the local community from Covid-19.

In a previous call with congressional staffers, State Department briefers said they are now processing roughly 850 Afghan SIVs per month, according to a congressional source.

As of June 1, the U.S. military had completed between 30 and 44 percent of the withdrawal, and had handed over six facilities to the Afghan Ministry of Defense, according to a U.S. Central Command press release.

Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby expressed “a sense of urgency” to address the SIV problem and said the administration is taking it “very seriously and moving on this as fast as we can.”

However, he cautioned that “we also need to make sure we do this right, that it's safe, that it's effective and that we've thought through all the possible contingencies here as we work through it.”



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