

URGENT STATEMENT:

**APRRN calls for concerted efforts to ensure protection during displacement in and from
Afghanistan**

BANGKOK, 20 August 2021

The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN), a network of over 200 civil society organisations and individuals from 28 countries, is gravely concerned for the safety and security of the people of Afghanistan after the Taliban have gained political and military control over the country. Like all people, Afghan men, women, and children have a right to protection from persecution, to shelter, to education, and to seek asylum, among other rights. We urge countries in the region and the international community to ensure full respect for these rights in the face of these severe humanitarian challenges.

“The unfolding situation in Afghanistan is deeply concerning, causing major displacement within the country, as well as compelling many Afghans, to seek refuge across the region. Nations, such as Pakistan, Iran as well as those in the Asia Pacific region ought to be alert to the humanitarian crisis. Afghanistan’s friends, such as Australia and New Zealand, must help with the refugee influx by creating a special humanitarian program to provide a safe passage out of Afghanistan for those at risk of serious harm by the Taliban.” -- Sitarah Mohammadi, Deputy Chair, APRRN

APRRN calls for all parties, including the Taliban, to comply with international humanitarian law and human rights. The right to seek asylum is a human right under multiple international instruments, including the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It applies regardless of whether a country has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention. States have obligations under customary international law to preserve cross-border access for civilians fleeing conflict and not forcibly return refugees. The principle of *non-refoulement* includes non-rejection at borders.

Decades of political upheaval, persecution, conflict, and violence in Afghanistan have contributed to 2.9 million internally displaced people and 2.2 million asylum seekers and refugees by the end of 2020.¹ The withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan and a rapid deterioration in the security and human rights situation in large parts of the country have led to [increased civilian casualties](#)² and mounting uncertainties and fear for safety. These developments come as the country is already suffering under a drought, food insecurity, and amidst the COVID pandemic.³ Many Afghans from provinces under threat have moved internally

¹ Figures based on estimates by 31 December 2020, UNHCR RBAP, ‘External Update: Afghanistan Situation #2’, 16 August 2021, available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/88207>

² “Between 1 May and 30 June 2021, UNAMA recorded 2,392 civilian casualties, nearly as many as were documented in the entire four preceding months. The number of civilian casualties in May-June 2021 was the highest on record for those two months since UNAMA began systematic documentation in 2009”, UNAMA, Afghanistan Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict MidYear Update: 1 January to 30 June 2021, 26 July 2021, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_poc_midyear_report_2021_26_july.pdf

³ FEWS-Net, “Second-season planting area likely below average due to atypically dry conditions and conflict”, July 2021, <https://fews.net/central-asia/afghanistan/key-message-update/july-2021>

and are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance: in 2021 alone, over 550,000 people were internally displaced, including 330,000 children, with most of the displacement having occurred since May.⁴ Others with the means available are attempting to leave the country for nearby Pakistan and Iran, who have long hosted millions of people from Afghanistan with very limited support from the international community. Further destinations include Turkey, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

The Taliban take-over of Afghanistan raises serious concerns for the well-being and safety of Afghans remaining inside the country. While generalised violence threatens everyone, persecution is likely to target a wide range of Afghans. Women and girls experience heightened restrictions and risks ranging from sexual and gender-based violence, exclusion from education and public life, to targeted persecution of women rights activists.⁵ Other at-risk categories include Afghans that have worked to promote human rights, democracy, and education; academics, writers, journalists, and other media workers; women rights defenders, members and activists of the LGBTIQ+ community⁶, people who have worked in the service of foreign countries, as well as members of ethnic and religious minorities such as Sikh community and Shia Muslims, in particular the Hazara people.

To avoid the escalation of this humanitarian crisis in our region means to prepare for the reception of men, women, and children fleeing the country seeking safety and protection. However, to adequately respond to this protection crisis, the international community will need to contribute. Similarities to people fleeing Vietnam in the 1970s and 1980s after the US retreat are obvious. Like at the time, a comprehensive plan of action⁷ should be developed among countries of arrival, countries of origin, and third countries including orderly departure programs, assistance in host countries, and quick access to asylum procedures. Afghan nationals should be assumed eligible and in need of international protection; APRRN suggests for countries and UNHCR to consider prima facie determination. Civil society, the humanitarian community as well as the Afghan diaspora and refugee communities, themselves, stand ready to support and contribute to planning and implementation of programs and responses.

Recommendations

Countries of asylum

⁴ OCHA, "Afghanistan: Conflict Induced Displacements in 2021", 15 August 2021, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/idps>

⁵ Heather Barr, HRW, 'The Fragility of Women's Rights in Afghanistan', 17 August 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/17/fragility-womens-rights-afghanistan>

⁶ LGBTIQ+ persons are especially at risk, as they are considered to be the visible representations of a foreign propaganda by radical religious groups including the Taliban. We anticipate forced marriages and homophobic motivated sexual violence as a form of conversion practices. We also anticipate honour killings. For the more visible and outspoken LGBTIQ+ persons, we anticipate greater physical violence even leading to summary execution.

⁷ Alexander Betts, 'Comprehensive Plans of Action: Insights from CIREFCA and the Indochinese CPA', 1 January 2006, <https://www.unhcr.org/research/working/43eb6a152/comprehensive-plans-action-insights-cirefca-indochinese-cpa-alexander-betts.html>

APRRN calls upon countries that host Afghan refugees and asylum seekers to:

- Ensure access and safe passage to Afghans seeking protection and/or wanting to claim asylum, especially, countries bordering Afghanistan will need to open borders and facilitate arrivals. The international community and donors should work with governments and civil society to provide resources to enable dignified and safe reception.
- Immediately halt the deportation or forced return of all Afghan nationals, refugees, and persons seeking asylum, regardless of whether their refugee status has been determined.
- Prepare for long-term protection of Afghans, allowing them access to protection from the host state and all rights associated with such status.

Resettlement countries

With developing countries already hosting over 80% of displaced people, responsibility-sharing is required. We call upon traditional resettlement countries, including the USA, countries of the European Union, Australia, and New Zealand, to follow Canada's lead in ensuring that vulnerable and at-risk Afghans are provided fast and unbureaucratic pathways to safety via an orderly departure program.

States hosting Afghan refugees on temporary or limited protection visas should extend these visas indefinitely and expand family reunification quotas and programs. This is an extraordinary situation and should be treated as such; increased support for Afghans should not mean decreased support for other vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers.

Donor countries

Resettlement alone is unlikely to address the displacement and insecurity of most Afghans. APRRN calls upon donor countries to contribute to the protection of Afghans by supporting humanitarian assistance to those remaining in Afghanistan and in developing countries, including through support to local and refugee-led organisations, who must ensure that help reaches those most affected.

The current situation in Afghanistan did not come out of nowhere, historic actions and inaction of many actors played a role. It is important to realise that a crisis of protection and rights will eventually spillover. Genuine steps are needed now to address the situation.

The Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) is a network of over 200 civil society organisations and individuals from 28 countries committed to advancing the rights of refugees in the Asia Pacific region. APRRN aims to advance the rights of refugees and other people in need of protection through joint advocacy, capacity strengthening, resource sharing, and outreach. While APRRN statements are prepared in consultation with members, they do not necessarily reflect the views of all APRRN members.

Media Contacts:

Sitarah Mohammadi, Deputy Chair, APRRN, Email: sitarah_m@outlook.com

Lars Stenger, Interim Secretary General, APRRN, Email: lars@aprrn.org