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U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Border Security, Facilitation, and Operations
Subcommittee on Oversight, Management, and Accountability

“Operation Allies Welcome: Examining DHS’s Efforts to Resettle Vulnerable Afghans”

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Chairwoman Barragán and Ranking Member Higgins of the Subcommittee on Border Security, Facilitation, and Operations; Chairman Correa and Ranking Member Meijer of the Subcommittee on Oversight, Management, and Accountability; and Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement for the record and testify today on Operation Allies Welcome and the resettlement of Afghans in the United States.

My name is Robin Dunn Marcos and I am the Senior Director for Resettlement, Asylum, and Integration Programming at the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The IRC was founded in 1933 at the suggestion of Albert Einstein and is currently at work in 40 countries and in 31 offices across 28 U.S. cities. The IRC helps people whose lives and livelihoods have been shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover, and regain control of their future. The Resettlement, Asylum, and Integration department creates opportunities for refugees and other vulnerable migrants to thrive in the U.S. and Europe, serving more than 50,000 individuals each year through a diverse portfolio of programs aimed at five core outcomes: health, safety, economic wellbeing, education, and empowerment. In the U.S., the IRC has partnered with the U.S. government to resettle more than 412,000 refugees and Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) recipients comprising over 100 nationalities. In my work, I oversee programming across these offices and provide technical support to the Resettlement Support Center Asia, which conducts overseas processing for inbound refugees to the U.S. through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP).

Since late July 2021, the IRC, at the invitation of the U.S. government, has been working to welcome, process, and eventually resettle tens of thousands of Afghans who are at risk of reprisal at the hands of the Taliban because of their affiliation with the U.S. or other reasons. In support of “Operation Allies Welcome”, I have led a team to quickly stand-up services on the eight “Safe Havens” established on U.S. government facilities across the country. I am overseeing a staff of over 400 employees, including interpreters, many of whom are former SIV recipients, to register and process Afghan guests for onward travel to final destinations; coordinate interpretation services and volunteer management; and support government partners to complete medical checks and other immigration processing steps, among other activities. The IRC is also managing the assurance process that matches Afghan guests with one of the nine sponsoring Resettlement Agencies (RAs). The IRC alone is expected to sponsor over 10,000 parolees through the Afghan Placement and Assistance (APA program) across its network of resettlement offices this year. By contrast, IRC resettled a total of 3,822 refugees and SIV recipients in FY21 through the Reception & Placement program. 2,122 arrivals were from Afghanistan.

The IRC's involvement has grown in proportion to the scale of the operation. Initially, our activities were limited to one Virginia-based government facility and focused narrowly on the reception of Afghans who were in the final stages of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) processing. As the evacuation effort grew, so too did our operations. Today, across the eight government facilities, we are supporting the reception and processing of over 60,000 Afghan guests. Guests arrived with a variety of immigration statuses, including Lawful Permanent Residency, humanitarian parole, and U.S citizenship. Guests are expected to stay at the government facilities for weeks or months, depending on their visa status and processing steps, the ability of resettlement agencies to absorb this capacity, and public health measures to mitigate the risks of communicable diseases.

As operations have turned from a short, emergency response to a longer-term effort, the needs of guests have and will continue to change. The IRC has strived to incorporate its full breadth of humanitarian expertise in areas such as prevention and response to gender-based violence, child protection and psychosocial support for refugees. IRC is also ensuring that minimum standards are in place for safeguarding and staff care for all IRC operations. Services are expanding across government facilities by partner entities, including legal counseling, cultural orientation, English lessons, recreational activities, trauma-informed psychosocial support, family reunification services, and donations distribution.

As with any rapid humanitarian response, challenges have arisen. We have found the U.S. government to be a willing partner in addressing these problems and working toward sustainable solutions. Some challenges, however, require the intervention of Congress. We were grateful to see the inclusion of supplemental emergency funding for the Afghan evacuation and resettlement effort in the recent Fiscal Year 2022 Continuing Resolution, as well as a critical provision to extend resettlement services to Afghans entering the country under humanitarian parole. Additional necessary steps remain.

First, it is critical that Congress pass legislation to ensure Afghans are able to simply and quickly adjust to Lawful Permanent Resident status. Most Afghans arriving in the U.S. are entering under humanitarian parole, which will only permit them to remain in the U.S. for up to two years and which does not offer a pathway to Lawful Permanent Resident status. Humanitarian parole also does not protect Afghans from refoulement, putting them at risk of being forcibly returned to persecution, torture, or other serious human rights violations. Humanitarian parole was used to expedite the admission of these individuals given the emergency nature of the evacuation, despite these Afghans being eligible for a Special Immigrant Visa or resettlement through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Corrective action is needed to ensure our new neighbors are not penalized and forced to seek existing alternative protection pathways, such as asylum, that are limited and overwhelmed. This would likely result in tens of thousands of new asylum claims, and given the asylum system backlog, inevitable and lengthy legal limbo for many. Asylum applicants are subject to a one year wait time for employment authorization while their application is pending and their ability to apply for other benefits, like driver's licenses and health insurance, would be specific to their state residency.

Second, we urge Congress to demand the Biden administration create a categorical humanitarian parole program for, at a minimum, U.S.-affiliated Afghans who remain in Afghanistan or have fled to third countries. The administration is currently prioritizing American citizens, Green Card holders, immediate family members of American citizens and Green Card holders, U.S. embassy staff, and Chief of Mission -approved SIV applicants. A pathway to refuge is just as critical for persons eligible for the Priority 2 program, all Special Immigrant Visa applicants, and family reunification cases. The administration's commitment to these Afghans did not end on August 31. Tens of thousands are living in fear of reprisals specifically because of their affiliations with the U.S. Congress should create a humanitarian parole program to guide and expedite the review of these applicants and to grant travel documentation allowing those eligible to travel to the U.S.

Third, we urge Congress to mandate reforms to the Afghan P-2 resettlement program to increase applicant access, expand eligibility, streamline processes, and improve communication across applicants, referring organizations, and U.S. government program administrators. Eligibility should be expanded to include parents, siblings, and their immediate families (a measure particularly critical for female-headed households or where women are sole wage-earners); surviving eligible family members of

a deceased Principal Applicant; and employees on sub-grants and sub-contracts of U.S. government-funded efforts. Referral processes should be streamlined and standardized across funding agencies. Physical documentation requirements should be adjusted to account for the realities of a humanitarian emergency: applicants should not be turned away from life-saving approvals due to administrative barriers. We also urge Congress to support referring organizations to expand staffing and internal processing capacity to support the thousands of current and former staff members now seeking protection. Further, we urge the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration to create an information platform for P-2 applicants to provide up-to-date guidance and establish a regular NGO consultation group to identify and resolve implementation challenges.

Finally, **Congress should also ensure Afghan parolees have access to affordable and efficient legal services.** Given the temporary nature of parole and the complexity of immigration law, Afghan parolees must receive legal screenings to understand their options and pursue permanent status and protection as eligible. Without a legislative fix, many Afghans paroled into the U.S. will have no alternative than to apply for asylum, contributing to the already overwhelmed U.S. asylum system. Without affordable, high-quality legal assistance, Afghan parolees will be set up for failure, having to navigate the U.S. asylum and immigration system, deadlines, and requirements on their own and often without sufficient evidentiary documentation or identification documents, which many were forced to destroy out of fear of Taliban reprisal precisely on account of their close association with the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. Many will be at risk of missing time-limited opportunities to pursue permanent protection and become vulnerable to detention and deportation.

There are also measures the Department of Homeland Security can take immediately to improve the ongoing evacuation, processing, and resettlement of Afghans.

DHS should work in close coordination with the Resettlement Agencies and PRM to facilitate smooth transitions from the government facilities to final destinations. The urgency of moving guests off the government facilities expeditiously has to be measured against the **pace of departures and the capacity of receiving communities.**

DHS should **expeditiously adjudicate humanitarian parole applications for Afghan nationals in a manner that does not disadvantage existing applicants, should grant fee waivers for humanitarian parole applications** and should create an electronic application process for these applications. To the extent DHS does not believe it can do a mass fee waiver for this category of applicants without a regulation, the process should be streamlined as much as possible. Foremost, DHS must **ensure robust funding for the Refugee Corps and staffing for overseas locations with Afghans to begin resettlement adjudications in earnest, creating safe** pathways and expediting life-saving refugee protections.

There are also operational steps that DHS can take to streamline the processing of Afghan guests in the U.S. With large numbers of Afghan parolees being unable to access their Arrival/Departure Records (Form I-94) from the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) website, **we urge CBP to issue hard copy Form I-94s at Ports of Entry.** U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) should support rapid self-sufficiency in clients by **issuing Employment Authorization Documents (EADs) to guests before they depart the government facilities** and offering EADs in a digital format.

For the IRC, involvement in this domestic emergency response is unprecedented and it is truly a historic operation in terms of size, scope, and complexity. Each of the guests has their own harrowing story of escape and are thankful to the U.S. for bringing them to safety. One of the IRC's staff members from the Atlanta office, himself a previous SIV recipient, has worked for us for two years. He went back to Kabul to help his wife and children evacuate and ended up trapped behind Taliban lines. He finally got out of Kabul and was evacuated to Germany for over a month. He and his family just arrived at one of the Safe Haven government facilities in Virginia and he is waiting to take them home. When asked how it felt to be back in the U.S., he replied, "The feelings can't be expressed! You don't know how much love I have for this soil."

We have witnessed a groundswell of support from the American public. The IRC has seen a 47 percent increase in volunteer applications in this past month compared to the same timeframe last year and recent polling by CBS News/YouGov shows that 81 percent of Americans say the U.S. should help Afghan allies come to the U.S. In this unique and urgent moment, we beckon the U.S. government, including the Department of Homeland Security, to engage with the IRC and its other partners in a fully open, transparent, and collaborative fashion.

Thank you for your time and holding a hearing on this important topic. I look forward to answering your questions.