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**Afghan Women's Organization
Refugee & Immigrant Services**

Submission to the Special Committee on Afghanistan

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Introduction

For over 30 years, the Afghan Women's Organization Refugee and Immigrant Services ("AWO") has been providing multiple settlement services to newcomers to Canada, with a special focus on women, their families, refugees, and people who have experienced war and persecution. The AWO is also a Sponsorship Agreement Holder ("SAH"). We have played a key role in supporting the refugee sponsorship program in Canada through the sponsorship and successful resettlement of over 5,000 refugees from around the world. As a result, AWO has established strong connections with the broader Canadian and refugee resettlement communities.

The AWO is an Afghan women-led organization, and since its inception, the AWO has been advocating for the human rights of refugees and Afghan women. Through the AWO's persistent and effective advocacy and operational efforts, we have maintained meaningful connections with the Afghan community (both locally and abroad).

The AWO has led several projects inside Afghanistan that focus on human rights, women's rights, children's rights, and access to education. This includes a number of home-based and underground schools for Afghan girls when the Taliban regime was in power during the 1990s. We also led educational and income generation projects for women inside Afghanistan, and in refugee camps in Pakistan. Currently, the AWO runs an all-girls orphanage in Afghanistan's capital city, Kabul.

Since the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan escalated in the summer of 2021, the AWO has been working tirelessly on many crisis response efforts, including supporting Afghan refugees that have been evacuated to Canada. This includes coordinating efforts and working collaboratively with partner organizations to identify the Afghan refugees' basic needs and deliver orientation sessions and services that are culturally and linguistically appropriate as well as providing emotional support. The AWO has also collected and delivered donations to the Afghan refugees who arrived with the clothes on their back, provided translation services to complete documents and understand COVID-19 protocols, and provided moral support during their transition process. As a SAH, the AWO has been sponsoring vulnerable refugees to Canada.

Given the AWO's long-standing commitment and deep-rooted connection to the Afghan community (in Canada and abroad), we are in a unique position to opine on the most pressing issues facing the Afghan people in this time of crisis. We leverage our experience supporting Afghan refugees in Canada as a SAH and a refugee and immigration-specific resettlement organization to ensure our advice is impact-driven, culturally appropriate, and holistic. We also leverage our experience leading and supporting human rights-related initiatives in Afghanistan to ensure our proposals are always inclusive, sustainable, and allow Afghans to have agency over matters affecting the future of their country.

The AWO has also been engaged in many advocacy efforts to help enhance Canada's response to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. While we commend Canada's humanitarian pledge to assist the people of Afghanistan, including the provision of \$56 million in humanitarian aid and committing to resettle 40,000 Afghan refugees, we are deeply concerned that Canada's pledge will fall short of its underlying goal to assist the people of Afghanistan in this time of need. We call on the Canadian government to act now and address the gaps in its current approach to the rapidly deteriorating crisis in Afghanistan. The AWO has drafted numerous press releases, calls to action, and letters to politicians with proposed changes to Canada's current crisis response, which we intend to outline in this submission.

Situation in Afghanistan

The Taliban's recent takeover of Afghanistan has brought about an unprecedented humanitarian crisis and eliminated the progress in human rights over the past 20 years for the people of Afghanistan, especially for women and girls. It has been reported that the Taliban have been seeking out high-profile women and detaining women civil society activists, restricting women's movement, severely curtailing access to employment, healthcare and higher education, and restricting the right to peaceful assembly.

Afghans now find themselves at the intersection of four decades of war, more than 70,000 reported civilian deaths in the last two decades, political and economic instability, a global pandemic, a second drought in four years, a harsh winter season, and extreme poverty.

More than half a million Afghans have been displaced inside the country primarily due to the recent crisis.¹ This is over and above the three million Afghans that were already internally displaced within the country. An estimated 80% of these internally displaced persons are women and children.² Many are living on the streets with no water, food, and shelter. The United Nations has called the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan “the worst humanitarian disaster we’ve ever seen.”³ It is reported that some 23 million people are in desperate need of food. At least one million children are at risk of dying due to severe acute malnutrition. The United Nations has further stated that Afghanistan is heading toward “universal poverty” and within the year, the poverty rate will be over 97%.⁴

Further, many vulnerable Afghans are in need of immediate evacuation and resettlement. We concur with the Immigration Law Section of the Canadian Bar Association that the existing special relief measures for Afghans are insufficient, too restrictive, encumbered by extensive delays, and fraught by lack of clarity and relevant information needed by applicants.⁵

Unfortunately, many vulnerable Afghans are ineligible under Canada’s current resettlement programs, and Afghans who fall under the programs’ purview and applied, have been waiting months for a meaningful response from Canadian authorities. As a result, at-risk Afghans are left stranded in Afghanistan in increasingly dangerous and precarious conditions. Afghans, such as judges and lawyers who helped prosecute the Taliban, and prominent female human rights activists, face threats of violence and travel between limited safe houses with dwindling savings.

Desperate Afghans who attempt to flee the country are subjected to bribe extortions and violence by smugglers and border authorities, and harsh weather conditions such as extreme cold.⁶

Afghans who have managed to flee to relative safety in neighboring countries are also enduring significant obstacles registering as refugees with UNHCR offices or other authorities, which is

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/afghanistan-emergency.html>

² <https://www.unhcr.org/afghanistan-emergency.html>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/12/afghanistan-is-facing-a-humanitarian-disaster-un-says.html>

⁴ <https://www.businessinsider.com/un-warns-afghanistan-will-enter-universal-poverty-within-a-year-2021-9>

⁵ <https://www.cba.org/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=04a835f1-b36d-42a9-ab58-faa25f5da270>

⁶ <https://nypost.com/2021/09/23/afghans-dying-at-border-amid-taliban-pakistan-tension/>

required in the context of private sponsorship by Community Sponsors and Groups of Five. These obstacles include, but are not limited to, unattainable refugee recognition, and raids, evictions and deportations.

In sum, the rapidly deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan is a cause for grave concern. The nation is tilting closer to universal poverty with each passing day. Afghans are increasingly unable to meet their basic needs and are forced to take desperate measures to maintain their lives and livelihood. Their human rights are threatened, civic spaces are shrinking, and women's rights are deteriorating. At-risk Afghans are left stranded with limited means of protection in the face of imminent threats of violence and persecution. Many vulnerable Afghans do not qualify for Canada's special programs; and for the Afghans that do, their application process is fraught with onerous procedural and evidentiary obstacles as well as limited or non-existent communication from Canadian authorities. Afghans who have managed to flee Afghanistan have had to endure dangerous travelling conditions and continue to find themselves in perilous conditions. Many have been killed while crossing borders. Authorities of neighboring nations make it near impossible for Afghan refugees to meet their basic needs and complete their applications for refugee status. Their time in neighboring nations is clouded by the constant fear of being deported and subject to persecution in Afghanistan.

Recommendations

We extend our gratitude to the Canadian government for leading the world in its commitment to resettle Afghan refugees and support the people of Afghanistan in this time of urgency. The announcement to resettle 40,000 Afghan refugees and provide \$56 million in humanitarian aid has brought hope to many vulnerable Afghans. This recent pledge is a reflection of Canada's continuous commitment to the people of Afghanistan. For decades, Canada has invested in stability and respect for human rights in Afghanistan. Its investments have advanced tangible progress in the areas of women's rights and access to education. However, we are concerned that Canada's investments in Afghanistan are severely threatened due to the country's dire humanitarian crisis which is fueled both by the lack of response on the part of the international community and the Taliban's inability to be an inclusive and representative government for its

people. We believe that Canada's efforts to support the Afghan population will fall short of its intended goals unless the gaps in its crisis response efforts are addressed.

At this time, urgent action is required to protect Afghans at risk and help address the immediate basic needs of those in Afghanistan. We believe Canada's humanitarian assistance objectives relating to Afghanistan should:

1. ensure aid is delivered to the most vulnerable by easing restrictions on transferring funds to independent and trusted NGOs, including local grassroots organizations and multilateral organizations;
2. have a long eye view that aid should be given in a way that opens up a pathway for reviving the economy and addressing development needs beyond preventing economic collapse; and
3. align with Canada's feminist foreign affairs practices and international assistance policy, such as working with Afghans in the diaspora to centre the voices of Afghan women and local communities in the decisions about how resources will be dispersed.

Many donors have generously donated to emergency relief efforts to deliver food and other basic necessities to the Afghan people. However, these short-term measures are not enough in light of the severity of this crisis. Afghanistan is on the brink of an economic collapse. The country is facing economic isolation and many Afghans have not been paid for months and lack essential services. There is about \$1.5 billion in the World Bank's Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, a pool of aid to which Canada and other donors contributed, that could be used immediately to restore a minimally functioning public sector in order to provide essential services like health care and education. Funding should also be directed to areas such as agricultural support and village-level (i.e., micro-level) development programs. We should be empowering the local communities by buying their goods and services, and providing them with the tools and resources they need to sustain themselves. They should further be involved in the decisions about their needs, how the resources should be dispersed, and community-based monitoring.

Although the AWO had limited resources (mostly modest donations from family and friends) for the programs that we implemented for women inside Afghanistan, we were able to enhance their capabilities and skills so that they could help themselves and their families. Our experience is a testament to the fact that a lot can be accomplished with a small amount of money and a long-eye view on development.

In addition to supporting the public sector, we need to alleviate the pressures on the private sector. Afghanistan needs a viable economy because humanitarian assistance will never be sufficient or sustainable. Many parts of the Afghan economy cannot function because of sanctions, asset freezes, and other economic restrictions. Economic strangulation is not likely to change the Taliban's behaviour and, in the end, will only hurt the most vulnerable Afghans. A collapsing economy and extreme poverty will lead to another migration crisis as well as create an opportunity for extremist groups, such as Daesh/ISIS-K, to capitalize on the misfortunes of the vulnerable and seek to recruit them.

We are also concerned about the US government's decision to seize \$3.5 billion of Afghanistan's \$7 billion currency reserves, while diverting the other \$3.5 billion to a trust fund. That money belongs to the Afghan people and is essential for the Afghan economy to survive its unprecedented pressures and this decision will further exacerbate the country's dire economic and humanitarian conditions.

Since the crisis unfolded in the summer of 2021, the AWO has been inundated with calls for assistance from Afghans in Canada, Afghanistan, and around the world. Unfortunately, the lack of clarity and guidance on the parameters of Canada's resettlement program and provision of aid has hampered our ability to respond and meet the needs of these vulnerable Afghans. We have identified several relief measures and concrete actions to help ensure Canada's success in welcoming Afghan refugees in a timely manner and in its humanitarian response and development efforts. Our recommendations will not only enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of Canada's crisis response efforts, but will also support Canadian stakeholders such as the AWO meet the needs of vulnerable Afghans.

The AWO's recommendations are as follows:

1. Increase Canada's financial commitment to humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan from \$56 million to at least \$100 million for the year 2022.
2. Engage with trusted humanitarian partners in Afghanistan to provide life-saving assistance, such as food, clean water, clothes, and medical assistance and empower the local communities by buying their goods and services and providing them with the tools and resources they need to sustain themselves. The local communities should also have a voice in the decisions about what their needs are, how resources should be allocated and how they should be monitored.
3. Follow what others around the world have done by creating exemptions and other workarounds to enable the transfer and delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, without the money going to the Taliban.
4. Resettle 40,000 Afghan refugees in an expeditious manner given the urgency and severity of the crisis. This includes establishing a concrete timeline of resettling 5,000 Afghan refugees per quarter, partnering with referral organizations in Canada and in third countries, and creating special operation centres in third countries to facilitate on the ground screening and processing.
5. Remove impediments in the private refugee sponsorship process. This includes waiving the requirement for formal UNHCR refugee recognition, recognizing displaced Afghans as *prima facie* refugees, removing the caps on the number of Afghan refugees that SAHs can sponsor, and removing the onerous requirement that private sponsors must deposit all financial assistance up-front.
6. Expand the eligible categories under the special humanitarian program to make them more inclusive, such as including the category of gender-based persecution, and allow at-risk Afghans that are still inside Afghanistan to be eligible for resettlement to Canada through

this program.

Conclusion

The crisis in Afghanistan is intensifying at an unprecedented rate. The population faces widespread hunger, dwindling medical supplies and services, a crippled economy, and shrinking human rights protections. We recognize that Canada has valiantly stood alongside the people of Afghanistan in this time of crisis. It has committed to resettling Afghan refugees and the provision of humanitarian aid, but a crisis of this severity and scope requires a defined plan and swift action to help at-risk Afghans start a new life in safety and dignity. The recommendations outlined in this submission can strengthen Canada's response to the crisis in Afghanistan and provide a ray of hope to the vulnerable Afghans who have advocated for principles that we, as Canadians, strongly value. These Afghans have fought for the principles of women's rights, justice, and equality. We must match their bravery and resilience and push through the difficulties before us. This is an opportunity for Canada to strengthen its standing as a peacekeeping nation and add a chapter to its legacy of providing assistance to vulnerable people in crisis.

We express our gratitude for this opportunity to provide input on Canada's response to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. We hope that our submission will be of assistance during the Committee's deliberations.