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United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 8, 2021

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

I write with grave concern that American citizens who are actively seeking to leave Afghanistan remain trapped in the country and that a majority of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants were not evacuated as part of Operation Allies Refuge. Last week, I joined 25 of my Senate colleagues in requesting additional information on the American citizens, legal permanent residents, and Afghan SIV applicants who have been left behind in Afghanistan. I'm disappointed that the administration did not respond by the requested date, and look forward to a prompt reply.

When the Taliban last governed Afghanistan under a system of fundamentalist Islamic law, their rule was defined by a brutality towards its citizens unmatched in modern times. There is no reason to believe that their governing ethos has changed after twenty years of fighting American, coalition, and Afghan forces to regain power. Indeed, the interim cabinet includes Mohammad Hassan Akhund, who served in the Taliban government in the 1990s as the as the deputy prime minister, and Sirajuddin Haqqani, head of the foreign terrorist organization known as the Haqqani Network, as the acting interior minister. As you know, Sirajuddin Haqqani is on the FBI's most wanted list in connection to some of the deadliest attacks against the United States and coalition forces in Afghanistan.

While the Taliban will undoubtedly return to the barbaric rule for which they were known, the Afghans most at-risk include those who aided the United States and coalition forces. In establishing the SIV program, the United States made a commitment to the individuals who worked directly with our forces. President Biden has repeated his commitment to help this population. The fact that we apparently could not evacuate a majority of SIV applicants and their families during the noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO) cannot be considered a success. Now that the United States government no longer maintains a presence in Afghanistan, we are forced to rely on the cooperation of the Taliban to assure safe passage of American citizens, legal permanent residents, and SIV applicants out of the country.

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According to recent news reports, many of these individuals have tried to leave the country via charter flights, but those flights have been held by the Taliban because not all passengers on the flight manifests have proper documentation, and therefore these passengers are stranded. While the State Department has made public statements opining the difficulty of verifying the accuracy of the manifests, the identities of the passengers, and whether the flights have adhered to aviation security protocols, there don't appear to be other options to exit the country outside of charter flights or dangerous overland routes to contiguous countries. Given the conflicting public reports on this and other instances where American citizens, legal permanent residents, and eligible Afghans have tried to leave and are unable to do so, I respectfully request answers to the following questions:

What plans are being developed to provide safe passage of American citizens, legal permanent residents, SIV applicants and their families that do not ultimately rely on the Taliban to facilitate or approve of departure?

How is the State Department working with non-governmental organizations or other groups arranging charter flights to verify that the manifests of these flights include American citizens, legal permanent residents, SIV applicants and their families, or other cleared Afghans?

How is the State Department working with partner nations to facilitate landing rights for charter flights carrying American citizens, legal permanent residents, SIV applicants and their families, or other cleared Afghans?

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Deb Fischer

Deb Fischer
United States Senator