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We must do more, and better, for Afghan refugees

South Australian refugee advocates are calling on the Australian Government to do more to help Afghan refugees currently fleeing the chaos and looming humanitarian crisis in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, and to offer permanent protection to the more than 4200 Afghan refugees currently in Australia on temporary protection visa (TPVs).

As far back as April retired military leaders, foreign affairs commentators, Afghan community leaders and human rights advocates have been calling on the Australian Government to do more to help evacuate Afghan nationals who served alongside Australian forces as interpreters, guards and local guides. Other groups who have much to fear include academics, journalists, human rights activists, women and members of the Hazara ethnic group.

“These people quite rightly fear for their lives and safety under the Taliban,” says Rev Sandy Boyce, Chair of Justice for Refugees SA. After reports that Australia’s first evacuation mission to Afghanistan rescued just 26 people, she fears the Australian Government will abandon them to an uncertain future under a regime with a long track record of human rights abuses.

Rev Boyce said attempts to brush off those calling on the Australian Government to do more and better as “lounge chair experts” were laughable. “Retired Admiral Chris Barrie is no armchair expert,” she said. “Nor are the members of our local Afghan community in Adelaide or returned Australian service personnel who have also been vocal.”

In relation to Afghan refugees already in Australia, Rev Boyce welcomed the statements from Immigration Minister Alex Hawke and Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne that no Afghan visa holder currently in Australia will be asked to return to Afghanistan while the security situation there remains dire and that those currently in Australia on temporary visas will be supported by the Australian government. “Afghan refugees currently in Australia deserve much more in the way of certainty, security, and support. As we have consistently argued, TPVs offer none of these for refugees claiming protection under Australia’s treaty obligations,” she said.

Rev Boyce also applauded the statement from the South Australian Leader of the Opposition calling on the Federal Government to show some compassion and offer a path to permanency for Afghan refugees currently in Australia. Rev Boyce called on other State and Territory leaders to similarly step up.

There are at least 4,200 Afghans on temporary visas in Australia and 53 in detention. “Quite understandably, community leaders say they are terrified of being sent back to Afghanistan,” said Rev Boyce. “And let us not kid ourselves by pretending the situation in Afghanistan is going to change anytime soon.”

The Australian government should immediately place a moratorium on all deportations and forced returns of Afghan nationals. Because temporary visas are subject to applications for renewal, we urge the Australian Government to create a pathway to permanent residency for all those on precarious temporary visas. Citizens of Afghanistan transferred to Papua New Guinea or Nauru should be relocated to Australia and similarly afforded international protection.

“As a nation we have done this very recently, following our better lights,” said Rev Boyce, pointing out that Australia granted protection to Hongkongers in December, extending their temporary visas by five years and providing a pathway to permanent residency.

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