August 11, 2022

Secretary of State Antony Blinken
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Sent via email

Dear Secretary Blinken,

As the one-year anniversary of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan approaches, we the undersigned press freedom and journalist safety organizations write to urge you and the Department of State to take every possible step to expedite the processing of Priority 2-referred Afghans under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and Special Immigrant Visa applications (P-2 and SIV) from at-risk Afghan citizens, and in particular journalists. While all human rights defenders remain in peril and are in urgent need of attention, Afghan journalists formed a critical component of two decades of democratization efforts in Afghanistan. They made it possible for the rest of the world to access and understand the inner workings of the country. Following the U.S. withdrawal, Afghanistan’s vibrant media sector was immediately targeted and continues to be under threat. The lives and livelihoods of hundreds of journalists and media workers depend on the U.S. making good on the commitments it made to ensure a swift process for qualified applicants to reach safety.

We are grateful for the public commitments you and President Joe Biden made in the weeks and months following the evacuation. However, one year later, the need remains immense and time is of the essence, particularly for those who are now stranded in a third country and facing the imminent possibility of being forced to return to Afghanistan.

The signatories of this letter are all members of the Journalists in Distress (JiD) Network, a group of 24 organizations that provide emergency assistance and safety support to journalists and media workers in crises globally. All our members are engaged in efforts to provide emergency funds, relocation support, and other resources in response to a growing demand from journalists and media workers under duress. Our organizations have helped in the evacuation, relocation, and provision of emergency support to hundreds of Afghan journalists since August 2021.

Collectively over the past year, our organizations, along with other members of the JiD, have received daily requests for assistance from displaced Afghan journalists with no access to immigration support or guidance, no insight into the timeline for processing visas, and no knowledge of what to do to get themselves and their families to safety. In many cases, they are now stranded in countries where they cannot work, or where their temporary visas—issued while awaiting P-2 and SIV processing—are now due to expire. Reports on the pace of P-2 processing paint a troubling picture. For journalists in this position the options are limited: risk homelessness, hunger, and potential legal consequences should they overstay their temporary visas or face the harrowing decision to return to Afghanistan.
Journalists in Afghanistan risked their lives to report the news, providing a vital public service and shining a light on circumstances often shrouded in darkness. They also acted as fixers, producers, and co-reporters to countless U.S. journalists and outlets, efforts for which this country owes them a debt of gratitude—and a lifeline.

From the initial days of the U.S. withdrawal, the Biden administration has repeatedly stated a commitment to protecting the most vulnerable and ensuring that those eligible for P-2 and SIV would be processed and moved to safety efficiently. A year later, there is little to show for it. Journalists remain in immigration limbo, from Islamabad to Mexico City, with little idea of when they can expect to receive an official update on their applications or be reunited with their families.

We understand that immigration processes must be thorough and that the demand is great, but it has now been a year and the situation is no less urgent than it was in August 2021. Therefore, we call on the Biden administration to:

1. Publicly commit to expediting the timeline for processing P-2-referred Afghans’ applications.

2. Work with governments where P-2-referred Afghans now reside to secure commitments that these governments will not deport the Afghans who are waiting for their applications to be approved.

3. Consider allowing P-2 applicants to claim asylum and allow Afghans who have entered the United States as parolees to be granted the legal status and benefits of resettled refugees, which we understand is within your legal authority.

4. Expand the range of immigration options available by supporting a congressional proposal to create an emergency pathway specifically for at-risk journalists, and identifying an alternative option for the many journalists that were ineligible for SIV or P-2, and lacked a pathway altogether.

Our organizations stand ready to support this process. Journalists’ lives depend on it.

Sincerely,

Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE)
Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
English PEN
European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)
Free Press Unlimited (FPU)
Freedom House
International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN)
International Media Support (IMS)
International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF)
PEN International
Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
Rory Peck Trust (RPT)