



Refugee Council
of Australia

HOW RESTORING 20,000 LOST REFUGEE VISAS COULD SAVE LIVES AT RISK IN AFGHANISTAN

After the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in August 2021, hundreds of thousands of Australians supported calls for the Australian Government to respond generously, calling for a special intake of 20,000 places for refugees from Afghanistan on top of the recently reduced Refugee and Humanitarian Program. The Government is yet to agree, announcing that it will allocate 3,000 visas within the annual program (which was cut last year to 13,750 places).

Is the request for a special intake of 20,000 refugees from Afghanistan an unrealistic request? Here are eight reasons why it is reasonable, necessary and worthwhile.

1. The humanitarian need is great

As 2021 began, 5.7 million Afghans were forcibly displaced – 2.6 million as refugees and 239,000 as asylum seekers in other countries and 2.9 million displaced within Afghanistan. In the 9½ months since then, 667,800 more Afghans have been forcibly displaced within the country and 48,180 have sought refuge in Iran, Pakistan and Tajikistan. The UN refugee agency UNHCR fears that as many as 500,000 Afghans could flee the country as refugees in the next six months. That scale is reflected here, as Australia has seen over 26,000 visa applications comprising over 120,000 people from Afghanistan, all applying in the past two months.

2. Australia has deep links with Afghanistan

The 20-year involvement of Australian armed forces in Afghanistan from 2001 was the longest international military engagement in Australian history. More than 39,000 Australian Defence Force personnel were deployed and 41 Australians lost their lives. This \$10 billion military engagement has been supported by \$1.5 billion in Australian overseas development assistance to Afghanistan since 2001, aimed at promoting the empowerment of women and girls, human rights, economic development, education, health and effective governance. Citizens of Afghanistan who have shared this vision for their nation's future and participated in its implementation are now among those at great risk.

3. The Federal Government can restore visas recently cut from the refugee program

When the Australian Government handed down its 2019 Budget, it planned an annual Refugee and Humanitarian Program of 18,750 places, budgeting for 75,000 places over the four years of the forward estimates (July 2019 to June 2023). Since then, more than 28,000 places have been cut out of the program. The 2019-20 program fell 5,579 places short when the COVID-19 pandemic called a halt to the issuing of new visas in March 2020. In its 2020-21 Budget, the Government cut the annual Humanitarian Program by 5,000 places per year. Since then, the reduced 2020-21 program has fallen short by 7,803 places due to the pandemic. The number of refugee and humanitarian visas issued in the four years to June 2023 will be at least 28,382 fewer than announced in the 2019 Budget. This sits in stark contrast to the Migration Program for 2020-21: it was fully subscribed, even during the COVID-driven border closure, with more than the 160,000 places delivered.

Refugee and Humanitarian Program places 2019-2023

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	Total
Total places in 2019-20 Budget (forward estimates)	18,750	18,750	18,750	18,750	75,000
Places removed in 2020-21 Budget	-	-5,000	-5,000	-5,000	-15,000
Visas not issued due to COVID pandemic	-5,579	-7,803	-	-	-13,382
Revised total	13,171	5,749	13,750	13,750	46,618
<i>Difference</i>	<i>-5,579</i>	<i>-12,803</i>	<i>-5,000</i>	<i>-5,000</i>	-28,382

4. Our resettlement response will save lives

During the previous rule of the Taliban from 1996 to 2001, Afghan citizens were killed because of their opposition to Taliban rule, their religious beliefs, ethnicity, sexual orientation and their advocacy for women's rights. Despite the Taliban's attempt to claim that it has changed, summary executions, murders and kidnappings are already being reported. The size of our resettlement response matters because it will help to save the lives of people at risk. If we plan collaboratively with other resettlement states (including the United States, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the European Union), we can use our collective offers of resettlement to encourage Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan to keep their borders open to people whose lives are at risk. Support can also be offered through humanitarian aid and practical assistance. If border states feel unsupported, they are more likely to shut their borders, leaving those at risk with nowhere to seek safety.

5. We can match the generosity of the United States and Canada

After years of cuts to its refugee program under former president Donald Trump, the United States has set a target of 125,000 refugee places for the fiscal year starting on 1 October 2021. Many of these places will be dedicated to Afghans in need. The 73,500 people without US citizenship who were evacuated out of Kabul in the final two weeks of August will be separate and additional to this number. Evacuees who need protection are being given humanitarian parole for two years while they apply for refugee status under processes separate to the US resettlement quota. In August, Canada committed to resettling 20,000 people from Afghanistan but, in response to public pressure from within Canada, doubled its resettlement target to 40,000 on 27 September 2021.

6. Australia has done it before – and done it well

While Australia's resettlement of refugees peaked at 89,199 arrivals in 1949-50 under the Chifley and Menzies governments, the Fraser and Abbott governments led significant resettlement responses to refugee crises in Indochina (from 1976) and Syria and Iraq (from 2015). Australia accepted 50,158 refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in the five years to June 1981 and more than 130,000 over the 15 years to 1991. The Abbott Government's announcement in September 2015 of 12,000 additional visas for Syrian and Iraqi refugees (a two-year allocation on top of the existing annual program) enabled Australia to resettle 46,085 Syrian and Iraqi refugees over the five years to June 2020.

7. We can also support refugees in other parts of the world

As we saw in the 2015 response to people displaced from Syria and Iraq, an additional intake on top of the annual program enabled Australia to continue to support refugees from other parts of the world (including Afghanistan, Myanmar, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Bhutan). In June, UNHCR identified 1.45 million refugees in urgent need of resettlement in the coming year, including refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Congo, South Sudan, Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, Burundi, Central African Republic, Iraq and Myanmar. Through an additional intake for Afghan refugees, we can continue to respond to the urgent need to resettle refugees from other parts of the world, remembering both those who need a safe and secure future and the host communities currently under strain.

8. The Australian community is ready to help

In the weeks since the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, refugee and multicultural services around Australia have been swamped with calls from Australians who want to help refugees from Afghanistan to make a new life in Australia. These calls are coming from all corners of the country and people of all backgrounds, offering employment, housing and donations of goods and cash, and wanting to be involved in sponsoring, welcoming and befriending refugees. All that is missing is the Australian Government offering a generous response through its Refugee and Humanitarian Program.