THE SIKHCOALITION

October 7, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
Harry S. Truman Building
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Re: Vulnerable Afghan Sikhs and Hindus Require U.S. Resettlement

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are writing in response to our August 23, 2021 letter requesting the State Department to assist with the resettlement of vulnerable Afghan Sikhs and Hindus. The Sikh Coalition recognizes the attempts by the State Department and Department of Defense to assist with evacuating some of the religiously persecuted Afghan Sikhs and Hindus during the final troop withdrawal. In late August, approximately 60 Sikhs and Hindus were able to obtain air evacuation to India on behalf of the Indian government. However, approximately 250 members of this vulnerable community remain trapped in Afghanistan.

As you know, under Taliban rule, the risks for all religious minorities in Afghanistan remain severe. On Tuesday, October 5, multiple news agencies reported that the Kabul gurdwara (Sikh house of worship) was stormed by heavily armed men who ransacked the property and damaged CCTV cameras.[1] We have independently confirmed that while no one was hurt, this attack did in fact occur.

The Taliban's well-established abysmal record on religious freedom goes back decades, including when the United States rebuked them in 2001 for forcing Sikhs and Hindus to wear yellow clothes--tactics lifted directly from the Holocaust.[2] Tragically, these oppressive and extreme tactics now define the best case scenario for the remaining Afghan Sikhs and Hindus.

On March 25, 2020, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) targeted a Kabul gurdwara, killing 25 Sikhs and injuring eight more. A four-year old girl was among the victims. The following day, the funeral procession was targeted with bombs, and survivors were given an ultimatum to permanently leave or face imminent death. Since then, approximately 400 Afghan Sikhs and Hindus have fled to third-party countries like India, but have been unable to obtain refugee status for resettlement to the

[1] Heavily armed men enter Kabul gurdwara, tie up guards, smash CCTV cameras, United News of India, (Oct. 5, 2021), *available at* http://www.uniindia.com/heavily-armed-men-enter-kabul-gurdwara-tie-up-guards-smash-cctv-cameras/world/news/2525473.html

[2] Pamela Constable, Taliban Singles Out Religious Minorities, The Washington Post, (May 23, 2001), *available at* https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/05/23/taliban-singles-out-religious-minorities/cfbd2858-519f-4994-97bb-29342d2b9a27/

United States. The threat of imminent death by these terrorist organizations is not hypothetical--it is a promise that has been made if the remaining Sikh and Hindus do not leave the country. This same ISIS group just last week took responsibility for the murder of a Sikh in Pakistan.[3]

Afghan Sikhs and Hindus who have previously obtained temporary refuge in India have lacked any meaningful government assistance, and their pathway for a future there is equally untenable.[4] India and Pakistan are not acceptable options for permanent resettlement, based on findings of our own United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, which has deemed these countries violators of religious freedom in their most recent 2020 report.[5] Upon the publication of that report, you expressed a strong commitment to defending the freedom of religion and "ensure that people of all faiths and backgrounds are treated with equal dignity and respect."[6]

As the world continues to pay attention to the plight of the remaining religious minorities trapped in Afghanistan, it is our expectation that once commercial flights resume, we can count on the United States to support efforts to safely evacuate and resettle this group of approximately 250 individuals to the United States.

The State Department has the power to defend the freedom of religion for Afghan Sikhs and Hindus by offering them direct resettlement opportunities into the United States. Prior to the withdrawal announcement, one Afghan Sikh family was referred and approved for the U.S. Humanitarian or Significant Public Parole Program because the State Department recognized the imminent danger they were in if they remained in the country. Following the troop withdrawal completion, we are aware of at least one other Afghan Sikh family that is being considered for the Humanitarian or Significant Public Parole Program. In August, as a result of Sikh Coalition efforts, State Department officials also confirmed that the other remaining Afghan Sikhs and Hindus were referred for evacuation. Since then, however, we have received no compelling information to suggest that their requests for visas have been approved. Having Afghan Sikhs and Hindus determined as refugees eligible for resettlement under the Humanitarian or Significant Public Parole Program would ensure that this community can rapidly escape for a chance of survival to a future that is free of religious persecution.

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[3] Islamic State-Khorasan claims killing of Sikh man in Peshawar, Hindustan Times, (Oct. 1, 2021), available at https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/islamic-state-khorasan-claims-killing-of-sikh-man-in-peshawar-101633028732596.html

[4] Mujib Mashal and Fahim Abed, India Offers Escape to Afghan Hindus and Sikhs Facing Attacks, New York Times, (Jul. 19, 2020), *available at* https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/19/world/asia/india-afghanistan-sikh-hindu.html

[5] Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, United States Commission International Religious Freedom, (April 2020), *available at* https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_Final_42920.pdf

[6] Secretary Antony J. Blinken on Release of the 2020 International Religious Freedom Report, U.S. Department of State (May 12, 2021), *available at* https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-on-release-of-the-2020-international-religious-freedom-report/

We request that the State Department ensure that the Sikhs and Hindus that remain trapped or have fled Afghanistan in the past year be granted visas consistent with prior actions under the Humanitarian or Significant Public Parole Program. If this group cannot be provided visa designations under the Humanitarian or Significant Public Parole Program, we strongly urge the State Department to provide USRAP Priority designation to Afghan Sikhs and Hindus.

President Biden's recent proposal to raise refugee admissions to 125,000 should accommodate this small group of approximately 700 religiously persecuted Afghan Sikhs and Hindus that remain in the country or have been forced to flee. The United States Senate[7] and House[8], and more than 300 organizations and faith groups[9], among other NGOs[10], and still others[11] have strongly urged that the State Department grant them a refugee path to the United States. Resettling this vulnerable group would also fulfill your May 12, 2021 "promise to the world that the Biden-Harris administration will protect and defend religious freedom around the world."

With your leadership, Afghan Sikhs and Hindus could soon be able to safely resettle and begin the process of finally having their religious freedoms protected in the United States.

Most respectfully,

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Hon. Ely Ratner, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs

[7] 20 Senators Press Pompeo To Extend Emergency Refugee Protections For Afghan Sikh, Hindu Communities Facing Persecution, United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, (June 26, 2020), *available at* https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/20-senators-press-pompeo-to-extend-emergency-refugee-protections-for-afghan-sikh-hindu-communities-facing-persecution

[8] Letter from 26 Members of the House of U.S. Representatives to Secretary Pompeo, Congress of the United States, (May 4, 2020), *available at* https://drive.google.com/file/d/13xJkQQqV2Jz3MSUelSnhDiUcMQButuJ7/view

[9] 300+ organizations and faith groups tell Biden: support Afghan refugees, Refugee Council USA, (Aug. 20, 2021), *available at* https://rcusa.org/resources/300-organizations-and-faith-groups-tell-biden-support-afghan-refugees/

[10] Letter from 25 NGOs on the Persectuion of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan, The Sikh Coalition, (Apr. 1, 2020), *available at* https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IcPdlNH8oZc7QAMJ92bl_-iDokjE-2Lv/view

[11] Bryant Harris, US religious freedom commission tells Taliban to respect minority rights, The National, (Oct. 6, 2021), *available at* https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/us-news/2021/10/06/us-religious-freedom-commission-tells-taliban-to-respect-minority-rights/