August 30, 2022

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Stand with At-Risk Afghan Sikhs and Hindus by Welcoming them to the U.S.

Dear Mr. President:

On May 14, 2020, you wrote that you “stand with the Sikh and Hindu communities in Afghanistan seeking safety for their families and the freedom to practice their faiths, and urge the Department of State to consider the request for emergency refugee protection” [emphasis added].¹ Your statement aptly recognized that Afghanistan’s religious minorities--particularly Afghan Sikhs and Hindus--were under a unique threat of prolonged persecution and violence that was unlikely to subside. Your statement provided hope and a promise of leadership that these communities are still holding on to today.

One year after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Afghan Sikh and Hindu families are more vulnerable to security threats than ever before. We call on you again to fulfill your campaign promise and demonstrate America’s moral leadership on the world stage by leveraging your executive authority to resettle Afghan Sikhs and Hindus, and other at-risk Afghans facing religious persecution, to the United States.

In 2018, ISIS-K killed 17 Afghan Sikh and Hindu community leaders who were traveling to meet President Ashraf Ghani.² On March 23, 2020, 25 Afghan Sikhs, including a four-year-old girl, were killed in a targeted attack by ISIS-K militants against a Kabul gurdwara (Sikh house of

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The following day, the funeral procession was bombed, and survivors were given an ultimatum to permanently leave or face imminent death. Since the Taliban takeover last year, the Taliban removed a holy flag representative of the Sikh community’s values and beliefs from a gurdwara in Paktia, and twice stormed another Kabul gurdwara with heavily armed men who ransacked the property and damaged CCTV cameras. On November 25, 2021, a bomb detonated near that same Kabul gurdwara. Yet another ISIS-K attack on the gurdwara occurred on June 18 this year, resulting in two additional casualties. On July 27, 2022, a bomb was detonated near the same gurdwara, targeting a Sikh-owned business. And all of this targeted violence comes against the backdrop of years of increasing harassment, discrimination, and violence against this community.

Though Afghan Sikhs and Hindus once numbered in the tens of thousands, widespread human rights violations by the Taliban and egregious and systematic targeted violence by ISIS-K have taken a severe toll: since the attack on March 23, 2020, this once-vibrant community has been reduced to approximately 650 individuals, including less than 100 individuals remaining in-country and 550 temporarily relocated to other countries. The majority temporarily relocated to India because they had no other viable options under the ISIS-K security threats and the Taliban’s intimidation tactics. The United States can and must take action to help all of these individuals—including those who have been placed into unsustainable temporary relocation

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7 Sirsa, Manjinder Singh. “A Massive Bomb Blast Reported at Gurdwara Road, Karte Parwan in Kabul the Sangat of Kabul Apprised Me They Are Safe but Situation in Afghanistan Is Becoming Uglier by the Daythere Are 235 Hindu &amp; Sikhs Still in Afghanistan@Ani @Punjabkesari @Thetribunechd @PTI_News Pic.twitter.com/Pceazgtmpr.” Twitter, Twitter, 25 Nov. 2021, https://twitter.com/mssirsa/status/1463861399109525504?s=20.


within India. To Afghan Sikhs and Hindus, who came from their own historically, geographically, and culturally distinct communities, India is no more home to them than it is to any other Afghan. Moreover, it is deeply unjust for these families to be removed from a precarious security situation only to face extremely limited economic opportunities and constricted legal and civil rights in an unfamiliar land. Resettlement to the United States remains their best hope for upholding our country’s pledge to be a safe harbor against religious persecution.

Since the 2020 attack in Kabul, the Sikh Coalition has advocated for the resettlement of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus to the United States. On April 1 of that year, more than two dozen non-governmental organizations joined the Sikh Coalition in sending a letter to then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to advocate for resettlement. With support from hundreds of community advocates, letters from 26 members of the House of Representatives on May 4 and from 20 U.S. senators on June 26 were sent advocating for the resettlement of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus to the United States. We have also reached out to your administration on multiple occasions, including a letter to you on August 23, 2021, and a follow-up letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the following October 7. While we are appreciative that the State Department has been able to recently relocate one Afghan Sikh family under the Humanitarian or Significant Public Parole Program, more remain left behind and in need of urgent assistance.

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We know the United States has the ability to help a great number of refugees in urgent need; our nation has a long and storied history of doing so, and it is a record which your administration has previously and rightfully been willing to champion. Most recently, you committed to accepting 100,000 Ukrainian refugees into the United States, and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has welcomed them into our nation within five months. Additionally, DHS has publicly committed that more Ukrainian refugees will be admitted. In stark contrast, approximately 76,000 Afghan refugees were evacuated to the United States and tens of thousands remain stranded. Afghan asylum seekers face long delays, and onerous requirements that have gotten more burdensome are among the many reasons for their slow admission to our country. We have a special obligation to Afghans facing religious persecution given the 20-year war effort. The situation is made more urgent by alarming reports of religious freedom violations in Afghanistan by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which has argued for “a collective call to action to ensure the protection for the most vulnerable religious communities around the globe.” Afghan refugees continue to be marginalized and left in a profoundly insecure environment. Without your intervention, these families will continue to suffer.

Our urgent request remains that the United States prioritize the safe resettlement of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus immediately. Like the Ukrainian refugee program, this vulnerable group must be afforded equal treatment through rapid resettlement utilizing all immigration methods, including temporary or immigrant visas, private sponsorship programs, admission through ports of entry, and the U.S. Refugee Admission Program. We also urge the Biden-Harris Administration to provide more Afghans a pathway for permanent legal status through the recently introduced Afghan Adjustment Act in Congress. Such programs should also provide assistance to more at-risk Afghans, including religiously persecuted Afghan Sikhs and Hindus.

We believe that the words of a President matter, which is why we urge you to stand with Afghan Sikhs and Hindus who are in greater danger now. They, like all human beings, require safety for their families and the freedom to practice their faiths. Mr. President, it is in your power to urge

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20 See footnote 11.
the Department of State to consider their longstanding request for emergency refugee protection before any more damage can be done to them in Afghanistan or India, where their religious freedom remains in peril.  

Americans are willing and able to help resettle these at-risk individuals, and we await your action.

Respectfully,

Mark Reading-Smith  
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Cc:  
Hon. Antony Blinken, Secretary for the U.S. Department of State  
Hon. Rashad Hussain, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom  
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom  
United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary  
United States House Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs  
United States House Committee on Homeland Security