

**To:** The Members of Special Parliamentary Committee on Afghanistan

**From:** Brian Macdonald, Executive Director, Aman Lara

**Date:** May 17, 2022

**Re:** Submission to the Special Parliamentary Committee on Afghanistan from Aman Lara

## **Honorable Chair, Vice-Chairs, and Members of the Special Committee on Afghanistan:**

### **BACKGROUND**

Aman Lara is a non-profit organization which consists of veterans, former interpreters and civilians from a broad range of backgrounds. We were founded at the beginning of the Afghan crisis in August 2021 because Canada needs an organization to support the evacuation of Afghans: both those who helped our war effort, and those who worked alongside us to advance Canadian democratic principles.

We work closely with the Canadian Government and only move people who have a pathway to Canada, and who are approved by IRCC. Since our inception, Aman Lara, which means Sheltered Path in Pashtu, has assisted almost 3000 Afghans escape the Taliban.

On 28 February 2022, we had the honour of appearing before the Special Parliamentary Committee on Afghanistan. In follow up to our testimony, we would like to bring to your attention the following issues in the hope that the Committee will consider the recommendations below for your final report.

### **THE ISSUES**

#### **1. Special Immigration Measures Program for those who assisted the Government of Canada (SIMs):**

In 2021 the Government of Canada (GoC), created three special programs to settle “at least 40,000” vulnerable Afghans. According to IRCC, 18,000 Afghans will be resettled under SIMs.<sup>1</sup> Thus far, it has received 15,065 applications and approved 10,330. Of this number, 6225 have already arrived in Canada.<sup>2</sup> The two referral partners to IRCC for those in the SIMs stream are the Department of National Defense and Global Affairs Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/afghanistan/special-measures.html>

<sup>2</sup> As of 12 May 2022. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/afghanistan/key-figures.html>

According to Mr. Bill Matthews, Deputy Minister of Defense, in his testimony to the Special Committee on 9 May 2022, DND has validated and referred 3,800 people under SIMs to IRCC for processing. Of those, 900 have been accepted and have arrived in Canada.<sup>3</sup>

DND referred SIM applicants has been the most successful program for Aman Lara, and has allowed us to move over 3000 successful applicants out of Afghanistan. We consider this program to be a considerable success, and we encourage the government to continue and expand this program. This is where we have been seeing significant results. This is not the time to close or limit it, but rather we should reinforce this strength.

We have identified no public information on the number of inquiries received by Global Affairs Canada, nor how many referrals have been sent from GAC to IRCC under the SIMs program. Aman Lara has not encountered or processed any successful GAC referrals.

## **2. Special Humanitarian Program (SHP)**

To date, Canada has welcomed 6825 Afghans under the SHP category.<sup>4</sup> The program is a mix of both privately sponsored refugees (PSR), and government assisted refugees (GAR), who must be referred. IRCC stated referral partners are: UNHCR, Frontline Defenders (FLD), Protectdefenders.eu, NATO allies, and the US government (USG).

It is our understanding that the vast majority, if not all, of the quota limit for the GAR spaces were already filled by the end of last year. This leaves private sponsorship as the only pathway to Canada available for those Afghans eligible under the SHP, which is a lengthy and laborious process, even without refugee status determination (RSD) requirements granted to Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH), agencies. In addition, the process for acquiring SAH spaces under IRCC's OAS (Operation Afghan Safety), program has been lacking in transparency and efficiency.

As a result, Canada has yet to live up to its stated policy objective of prioritizing high risk Afghans, including women leaders, human rights defenders, persecuted ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTI individuals, and journalists and those who helped Canadian journalists; and ensuring their expedited arrival in Canada.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://parl.vu.parl.gc.ca/Harmony/en/PowerBrowser/PowerBrowserV2/20220509/-/1/37016?gefdesc=&startposition=20220509195811>. 19:58:10.

<sup>4</sup> Those eligible for the SHP must be outside Afghanistan, referred by an identified partner of IRCC, and fall under one of the following categories: women leader, human rights defender, LGBTI individual, persecuted ethnic or religious minority, journalist or those who helped Canadian journalists.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The SIM Program should remain open and should immediately be expanded considerably beyond the current limit of 18,000 applicants.
2. All those who are currently being validated by DND or GAC and who can be confidently referred to IRCC once the process is complete should be accepted as part of Canada's commitment to those who unfailingly served us.
3. We encourage Global Affairs Canada to expand the work they have been doing in conjunction with us and Journalists for Human Rights to ensure the safe and legal passage of all Afghans with a pathway to Canada are safely brought out of Afghanistan. There exists a unique opportunity to scale up in order of magnitude all those accepted into the SIMs program.
4. Implement safeguards such as Memorandums of Understanding that would allow for the funding of programs and services directly within Afghanistan in such a way that Government Employees and contracting authorities would not be in contravention of section 83 of the Criminal Code as it relates to the funding of terrorism through the creation of contracts, contribution agreements, grants, or any other method of funding
5. Establish a referral mechanism that maximizes Canadian NGOs' knowledge of their applicant population. NGOs such as ourselves and our partners under the Afghanistan Strategic Evacuation Team, including Journalists for Human Rights and Rainbow Railroad Canada, are best informed about the populations we represent. This will ensure faster, better informed and more precise referral of refugees under the SHP who reflect Canadian priorities.
6. Significantly expand the spaces available for private sponsorship under the OAS. Establishing a national coordination mechanism for private sponsorship would make the process for accessing spots more transparent and efficient.
7. Develop additional funding mechanisms for organizations working eligible applicant populations under the SHP to ensure that those hiding in Afghanistan and neighboring countries can safely await processing to Canada.
8. Consider more agile approaches, such as the government has successfully implemented with the Ukraine effort, to bring Afghans to Canada, including through temporary visa programs, economic pathways and student visa initiatives.