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Canada, allies urged to safeguard Afghan helpers

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OTTAWA - Canada, which left the war in Afghanistan seven years ago, and other countries now withdrawing their troops are being urged to swiftly resettle interpreters and staff who aided foreign governments and are at risk of retribution from the Taliban.

U.S. President Joe Biden has committed to a complete withdrawal of American and NATO troops before Sept. 11, and fears are intensifying that the Taliban will target Afghan interpreters, translators, embassy staff and others who have worked for foreign forces.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) said in a report Tuesday that the U.S., Britain, Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and other countries should "urgently" accelerate visa processing and relocation efforts.

Patricia Gossman, HRW's associate Asia director, said in the report that Afghans who worked with foreign troops or embassies face "huge risks of retaliation from the Taliban."

"Departing countries should commit to assisting Afghans who reasonably face danger because of their work with foreign forces," Ms. Gossman said.

Canadian soldiers were in Afghanistan for 12 years before ending the mission

seven years ago.

A federal government official said Ottawa understands the urgency of the situation and that work to assist certain individuals who worked for Canada is continuing.

The official is not being identified by The Globe and Mail because they were not authorized to speak publicly about the issue.

Rémi Larivière, a spokesperson for Immigration, Citizenship and Refugees Canada, said that in 2009, the government introduced a program for certain Afghan nationals who served as local staff in Kandahar province or were on a contract in direct support of either Canadian Forces or Global Affairs Canada.

He said that three years later, the department began implementing a revised policy toward reassessing cases that were not successful under the first policy.

More than 800 Afghan nationals, including family members, were resettled to Canada in total over that period, he said.

Afghans who were not eligible under the policies, Mr. Larivière said, can still apply to immigrate to Canada through existing provisions. In addition, those who do not meet the government's immigration criteria can request humanitarian

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and compassionate consideration.

Chris Alexander, Canada's ambassador to Afghanistan from 2003 until 2005 and then a United Nations representative in the country, said the federal government made a credible effort and has continued to show good faith toward those who worked for Canada, but said there is more work to do.

"There are Afghans now under threat who worked for us, not directly, but in other capacities for multinational capacities at the United Nations, at NATO headquarters ... who may also deserve Canada's protection," he said.

"So my plea would be for our government to take a harder look at the Canadian legacy in Afghanistan and how we protect those who served us so well, while doing the most we can possibly do to bring about a ceasefire and a successful conclusion to the conflict."

Jamie Liew, an associate law professor at the University of Ottawa and immigration lawyer, said protection should be extended to Afghans, including individuals who may not have worked directly for the Canadian government.

"Canada has been known to craft targeted protection programs to resettle different kinds of refugees ... so why wouldn't we craft one for this particular group of persons who could be at risk?" she said.

Prof. Liew said Canada has a moral responsibility to respond, or create such a program, because of the role the government had in increasing Afghans' risk of persecution.

"We were actually part of the reason why they are at risk, and so I think it's all the more important for Canada to step

up and recognize that we can't just depend on these people and use their expertise and skills and then leave them behind knowing the risk that they can face."

Human Rights Watch said in its report that the Taliban denied that former interpreters and others who worked for foreign governments were at risk. However, the militant group also warned that these individuals should "show remorse for their past actions and ... not engage in such activities in the future that amount to treason against Islam and the country."

The Taliban have long targeted civilians, the advocacy group added, particularly those they accuse of working for the Afghan government or foreign governments.

HRW said that as of June 1, the U.S. Department of Defence was still working on plans to evacuate Afghans considered to be at risk from the Taliban, but that the Biden administration had not yet formalized any expedited plans. About 18,000 Afghan applicants are awaiting a decision from the U.S., according to the organization.