



**THE HON ALEX HAWKE MP  
MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP,  
MIGRANT SERVICES AND MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS**

Ref No: MC21-031205

Mr Ken O'Dowd MP  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Petitions  
petitions.committee.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Mr O'Dowd

Thank you for forwarding me a copy of a petition EN2764 on behalf of the Petitions Committee under Standing Order 209(a) and (b) on 9 August 2021. In response to the petition, may I provide you with the following update on the Australian Government's continuing humanitarian efforts in response to the changing security circumstances in Afghanistan.

As you know, the Government has ceased its evacuation operations at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. The Government made every effort we could to get everyone out of Kabul, with our top priority being to evacuate Australians, visa holders and former locally engaged employees. The Government remains in close contact with our international partners and those in the region and we continue to monitor the situation in Afghanistan closely, and we urge all people remaining in Afghanistan to prioritise their safety. The situation remains highly volatile and travel throughout Afghanistan is extremely dangerous. The Government expects the Taliban to uphold its undertakings to allow Australians and Afghan visa holders to depart Afghanistan safely if they wish to do so. However, people remaining in Afghanistan need to carefully consider the risks should they attempt to leave by any route.

Since 2013, more than 2,000 Afghan Locally Engaged Employees (LEEs) and their families at risk of harm due to their employment supporting Australia in Afghanistan have been resettled in Australia. This includes over 780 LEEs who have arrived in Australia since January 2021. Visa grants under the LEE program in 2020–21 were the highest since 2013–14. Afghan LEEs and their immediate family members with valid Australian visas are automatically exempt from Australia's travel restrictions. People who have applied for, and not met the threshold for Afghan LEE certification but have a connection with Australia, or are extended family members of Afghan LEE settled in Australia, are automatically being prioritised for consideration under Australia's Humanitarian Program. Those that have been certified as LEE but who have not yet lodged a visa application are encouraged to do so as soon as possible.

Those Afghans who have been granted visas and are still in Afghanistan will be contacted over the coming weeks by the Department of Home Affairs about what to do when it is safe. These visas will be honoured, including where possible with assistance to travel to Australia. People in this group who have not yet been contacted by the Department can contact the nearest Australian immigration office outside Australia.

The Government is working to ensure that visa options continue to be available to Afghan nationals, both within Afghanistan and for those displaced from their home country, through Australia's long-standing Humanitarian and Migration Programs. The most appropriate visa pathway will depend on the individual circumstances of each case. In some cases, people have pending partner applications that will be finalised, others may be processed into the Humanitarian program.

We encourage people in Afghanistan who don't have a visa, and would like to seek Australia's protection, to apply under our Humanitarian program. Afghan nationals are being prioritised for processing with an initial 3,000 humanitarian places allocated to them within Australia's 13,750 annual program. The Government anticipates this initial allocation will increase further over the course of 2021–22. Particular priority will be given to persecuted minorities, women and children and those who have links to Australia. Applicants must meet the visa criteria and satisfy public interest criteria for character, security and health. The Government will also continue to utilise our close working relationship with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to identify those Afghans most in need.

I acknowledge this is a distressing time for so many people, including our Australian Afghan community, and we will do all we can to continue to assist those through our ongoing humanitarian efforts. The Government is working with Afghan community leaders in Australia, and leading refugee advocates and service providers to welcome people from Afghanistan to Australia and support their settlement. The Commonwealth Coordinator-General for Migrant Services, Alison Larkins, and expert in refugee settlement, Paris Aristotle AO, are leading an advisory panel to inform the Government's efforts to settle and integrate Afghan humanitarian entrants in Australia. The advisory panel includes Afghan community leaders and experts in migrant settlement and integration.

I also acknowledge that our veteran community may be affected by the situation in Afghanistan and am advised that the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) has reached out to the families of the 41 Defence personnel who tragically lost their lives in Afghanistan, as well as around 600 veterans and families identified as particularly vulnerable. Around 320,000 SMS messages were also sent to DVA clients to ensure they were aware of the support available to them and how to access it, if they needed it. The Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the Hon Andrew Gee MP, has also encouraged Australians to connect with a veteran in recognition that, as a nation, we must all play our part in ensuring our veterans and their families are supported.

DVA continues to implement a communications and stakeholder engagement plan, working with the media and ex-service organisations, to reinforce the message that 'support is available' to any veteran or their family if they need it, as well as engaging with the education sector to ensure the children of our veterans have appropriate support. These messages will remain particularly important as we commemorate the 20th anniversary of September 11 and the commencement of Australia's involvement in the war. I encourage you to promote the services of both DVA and Open Arms – Veterans & Families Counselling to any Australian Defence Force member, veteran or their family who may need some additional assistance.

I have copied this letter to the Hon Andrew Gee MP.

Thank you for bringing the concerns of those more than one thousand Australians who have supported this petition to my attention.

Yours sincerely

ALEX HAWKE

27/10/2021