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A plea to heed the chorus of Afghans urging Canadian aid

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A plea to heed the chorus of Afghans urging Canadian aid

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By ERIKA SIMPSON AUGUST 25, 2021

In less than a week, Afghan lives and families were ripped asunder, and here in Canada, I grieve and lobby for the innocent.



A British Royal Air Force Chinook helicopter pictured firing flares over Afghanistan in 2015. Western University professor Erika Simpson, who initially advised colleagues to take any form of transportation available to them to get out of Kabul and into India or Pakistan, now says that's too dangerous. *Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons*

Canada fought with NATO against the Taliban and played a strong role in rebuilding Afghanistan. More than [40,000 members of the Canadian Armed Forces](#) served in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014. In the Afghanistan theatre of operations, [158 Canadian Armed Forces members died](#). Seven Canadian [civilians](#) also passed away, with many Canadian veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder who will be recovering from physical and psychological injuries for decades to come.

For those of us who were involved with Afghanistan and want to help, can we sponsor a refugee on our own? We will need to join forces with organizations, like churches that are

willing to explain how we will house and feed families of five or more. As a [private sponsor, working with a “Group of Five” or more Canadian citizens and a “Sponsorship Agreement Holder,”](#) we will face heavy bureaucratic burdens because we will need to explain what, exactly, we have in place for Afghans that arrive. There will be a lot of paperwork and we will need money to sponsor groups of five or more.

We also need to get the applicant [recognized as a refugee by either the United Nations Refugee Agency or a foreign state.](#) Initially, I advised my colleagues to take any form of transportation to India or Pakistan—to get out of Kabul—but now that advice is dangerous. The Taliban are [blocking roads, searching houses, and beating some people](#) in the fleeing crowds. Some friends are hiding in their basements fearful of being captured.

As one colleague wrote to me [sic]: “We are still alive,” but “any second, minute, hour, and day [could] END the life, any time. I can’t stay in one place. I am changing the location every time. In this time there is no way to escape from Taliban. Only one way I can see that U.S. Army helicopters wings save us to take us to Kabul airfield, then other country, otherwise we have no way to become new refugee. I’ve lost my sleep. I don’t know where I’m going.”

Even if our colleagues get to the Kabul airfield, the runways are full of American and European planes transporting out their own citizens. U.S. [President Joe Biden has promised](#) to keep bringing out Afghan interpreters and embassy staff.

At this point, it is difficult to say what Canada will do over the long term. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has already promised to take in [20,000 refugees.](#) Compared to his promise to take in large numbers of Syrian refugees, this is a daunting promise to fulfill. Canada brought in [39,636 Syrian refugees](#) between Nov. 4, 2015, and December 2016.

But there are more than [five million Afghans](#) in Kabul—which grew to encompass almost half the urban population of the country—and there are [36.6 million people in the entire country.](#) It is a strife-ridden, small, and mountainous country about the size of Ontario that will be powerfully afflicted by drought and natural disasters due to [climate change](#)—and yet it has the same approximate [population size](#) as Canada.

We can blame [NATO officials for not publicly protesting](#) when Biden suddenly announced the withdrawal would be complete by the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attack on Washington, New York City, and the Pentagon. That date was arbitrarily chosen based on American needs, not on Afghan requirements. [NATO allies started withdrawing forces](#) from the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan by May 1, with plans to complete the drawdown of all troops within a few months.

The Afghan army was under-trained, poor, and under-equipped. [Once Taliban warlords began to threaten local warlords](#) that the soldiers would be killed, they fled by taking off their military uniforms, and some even joined the Taliban. The Americans fired from afar, but the concept of supporting the Afghan military from outside the country, using American bases and personnel outside the country was impractical and poorly conceived.

Many citizens in Kabul are rejoicing as Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's government was corrupt, withdrawn from the people, and unresponsive. We know now that [Ghani stole \\$169-million dollars](#) of which \$49-million was left on the tarmac for private guards to loot and take home. The corruption was endemic, and the president needed to resign well before the end of his eight-year mandate.

Poor Afghans will spit on Ghani's image and curse him for hightailing it out of the country with about [200 aides who will disperse all around the world](#), perhaps to lobby for more money and armaments. It is likely that there will be a decades-long civil war in Afghanistan because there are too many rifles, too many weapons, and the air defence system could be taken over by the Taliban.

On Sept. 11, if any Western journalists are still reporting from Afghanistan, we can expect to see American military equipment paraded through the streets by Taliban fighters. Biden's top security adviser admitted last week that the U.S. military has lost track of a ["fair amount"](#) of the billions of dollars of military equipment it gifted the Afghan military. Intelligence assessments presented to the U.S. president on April 24 estimated that Afghan forces could [hold off the Taliban for one to two years](#). However, leaving behind military equipment for Taliban looters was a tactical error with serious implications.

I am sad to receive emails from colleagues, begging me to help them. One email from a peace researcher whom I met at a [conference on nuclear dangers in Astana](#), explained in broken English that he is underground, does not know where his family is and whether he should stay underground to escape. "But today I am going outside from Kabul City if GOD save my life I will never forget this. Thanks everyone who help you about my case," the researcher wrote.

I had not heard from my friend since we were in Kazakhstan but out of desperation, he wrote on Aug. 13 that his life is in danger, begging, "so please help me, I need your help." As the brother of a warlord, he has focused since 2002 on negotiating peace instead of war. Therefore, I knew he had lent foreigners his guards and vehicles so they could travel through the rural countryside and try to negotiate peace with the Taliban.

My friend last wrote, "I proud about that because that was my duty to bring peace to my country." Now it is my duty to help him, but he is trapped in Kabul. In less than a week, his life and family were ripped asunder, and here in Canada, I grieve and lobby for the innocent.

Erika Simpson is an associate professor of international politics at Western University, president of the Canadian Peace Research Association, and author of NATO and the Bomb.

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