

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 25, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

We are writing to express our concern about the serious threats facing religious minorities in Afghanistan. Terrorist attacks by ISIS Khorasan (ISIS-K) threaten the very survival of Afghanistan's Sikh and Hindu communities, which have already reached historically low numbers. To protect members of these vulnerable religious minority communities, we urge the State Department to provide emergency refugee protection to Afghanistan's Sikhs and Hindus as they face terrorist violence at the hands of ISIS-K. We further urge the State Department and USAID to ensure that U.S. COVID-19 assistance reaches religious minorities in Afghanistan.

ISIS-K targets religious minorities in Afghanistan and poses an existential threat to Afghanistan's Sikh and Hindu communities in particular. The Sikh and Hindu communities once numbered around 250,000 people but now have fewer than 1,000 individuals due to decades of persecution. The communities continue to face discrimination in access to housing and employment, and the Taliban has previously mandated that Sikhs and Hindus wear yellow armbands or patches as a marker of their religious status. In recent years a new threat to Afghanistan's Sikh and Hindu communities has emerged: terrorist attacks from ISIS-K. In March ISIS-K launched an attack on a Sikh gurdwara in Kabul that killed 25 worshippers, and later detonated an explosion during a funeral service for those victims. As ISIS-K continues to attack civilians and international troops draw down in Afghanistan, Sikhs and Hindus are likely to face more violence.

In light of this existential threat, we urge the State Department to provide emergency refugee protection to Afghanistan's Sikhs and Hindus by referring them to the FY20 U.S. Refugee Admissions Program through Priority 1 (P1) embassy referrals. We further request that the Department consider designating this group for Priority 2 (P2) referrals. We believe the potential to eliminate this population of less than 1,000 people represents a dire circumstance that requires both the urgency of individual P1 referrals as well as access to the P2 designation. A P2 designation would maximize opportunities for resettlement of Afghanistan's Sikhs and Hindus under the FY20 allocations ceilings for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, including the allocation for refugees who "have been persecuted or have a well-founded fear of persecution on account of religion." For members of the Sikh and Hindu communities who prefer to remain in Afghanistan despite this existential threat, we urge State to work with the Government of Afghanistan to ensure that it provides proper protection for these communities.

In addition, the United States has provided \$20.6 million in total assistance to Afghanistan to address COVID-19. We urge the State Department and USAID to ensure that religious minorities in Afghanistan benefit from this assistance, as well as from any future COVID-19 assistance sent there. Ensuring that religious minorities receive U.S. COVID-19 assistance should be a priority in all countries where protection of religious minorities is a challenge.

Finally, we recommend that you engage with other members of the International Religious Freedom Alliance and encourage them to help ensure the security of vulnerable religious minorities in Afghanistan in the face of this existential threat.

This Administration has repeatedly highlighted protecting religious freedom as a top foreign policy priority. Sikh and Hindu communities in Afghanistan face an existential threat from ISIS-K because of their religion. To protect religious freedom, we urgently ask that you take these essential steps to defend these threatened religious minorities.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Thom Tillis
United States Senator



Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator



James Lankford
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

/s/ Patrick Leahy

Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

/s/ Robert P. Casey, Jr.

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

/s/ Chris Van Hollen

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Patty Murray
United States Senator



Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Jack Reed
United States Senator



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator