

## **Joint Department of State/Department of Homeland Security Report: Status of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program**

### **Introduction**

The Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and other U.S. government departments and agencies involved in the U.S. Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program are committed to helping the men and women who have taken enormous risks to support our military and civilian personnel. Congress, under section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, as amended, requires this quarterly report to review statistical data on nationals of Afghanistan who have applied for status as special immigrants.

The Department of State (State) issued 12,086 SIVs to Afghans in Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, including 3,626 principal applicants. As we continue to strive for process improvements, we also continue to ensure thorough screening for national security concerns. SIV issuance numbers through the third quarter of FY 2017 are available on [travel.state.gov](http://travel.state.gov).

On December 23, 2016, President Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY 2017 (Public Law 114-328), which provided an additional 1,500 SIV numbers for Afghan principal applicants. On May 5, 2017, President Trump signed the Consolidated Appropriations Act for FY 2017, Section 7083 of Public Law 115-31, which provided an additional 2,500 SIV numbers for Afghan principal applicants, for a total of 11,000 SIV numbers allocated since December 19, 2014. As of June 30, 2017, State has issued 8,675 out of the 11,000 SIVs to Afghan principal applicants who were employed by, or on behalf of, the U.S. government in Afghanistan, or by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) or a successor mission to ISAF.

### **Average Wait Times for Each Step of the SIV Application Process**

All steps in the SIV application process are outlined below and include the current average processing time for all involved U.S. government entities. This statistic captures total U.S. government processing time in calendar days, beginning with the applicant's initial submission of documents to State's National Visa Center (NVC) and ending with the date of visa issuance at a U.S. embassy or consulate. It does not capture those steps in the SIV process that depend solely on the applicant's initiative and are outside the control of the U.S. government. SIV applications move through 14 steps, in the following four stages: the Chief of Mission (COM) application process; Form I-360 petition adjudication by the Department of Homeland Security; visa interview and security screening; and final visa adjudication (issuance or denial).

<b>Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Processing Steps<sup>1</sup></b>			
<b>Stage</b>	<b>Step</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Average processing times in calendar days</b>
Chief of Mission (COM) application process	1	Applicant submits COM application package to State's NVC.	Applicant-controlled
	2	NVC reviews documents for completeness.	38
	3	NVC sends completed COM package to U.S. Embassy Kabul.	1
	4	U.S. Embassy Kabul reviews COM application and makes a decision to approve or deny.	141 (if all required documents are present)
	5	Embassy Kabul advises NVC if COM application is approved. If approved, NVC immediately sends approval letter to applicant. (If any documents reveal that applicant does not qualify for the program, the COM application is denied.)	5
Form I-360 adjudication process	6	Applicant self-petitions to DHS U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) using form I-360.	Applicant-controlled
	7	USCIS adjudicates petition and sends to NVC if approved. <sup>2</sup>	47
Visa interview process,	8	NVC sends instruction packet to applicant requesting standard	18

including pre- and post-interview <sup>3</sup>		immigrant visa documentation.	
	9	Applicant submits required documentation to NVC.	Applicant-controlled
	10	NVC reviews documents for completeness.	10
	11	NVC schedules applicant for next available interview at U.S. Embassy Kabul.	270
	12	Applicant is interviewed by consular officer on the scheduled appointment date. Administrative processing is initiated following the interview.	2
	13	The applicant's case undergoes administrative processing. <sup>4</sup>	374
Visa issuance to eligible applicants	14	Upon completion of administrative processing, applicant is instructed to obtain a medical exam. The visa is issued if applicant is eligible. In some cases, the passport will have expired, and the applicant is required to renew the passport.	Applicant-controlled
		<b>Total U.S. government processing time in calendar days<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>906</b>
<sup>1</sup> Processing steps are for SIVs authorized under section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, as amended. This applies to Afghan nationals in the SQ classification.			
<sup>2</sup> For I-360 petitions filed with USCIS between April 1 and June 30, 2017.			

<sup>3</sup>The majority of applicants receive SIV status by going through the process explained in this chart. Applicants who obtain SIV status in the United States apply for [adjustment of status](#) from USCIS.

<sup>4</sup>Line 13 totals include data for SIV applicants who completed administrative processing between April 1 and June 30, 2017. Average processing time for cases that remain pending cannot be calculated until they are completed.

<sup>5</sup> The statistics in this chart were formerly reported in business days in reports published April 2014 – April 2016. U.S. government processing times do not factor in applicant-controlled steps. Overall processing times are greater than U.S. government processing times. The completion in this quarter of administrative processing of 250 cases pending from 2015 resulted in the increase in total U.S. government processing time.

### **Applications Pending Longer Than Nine Months**

Even if an applicant has acted promptly in each of the applicant-controlled steps that precede step 13 of the SIV application process, applications may be pending longer than nine months for completion of administrative processing (step 13). Administrative processing is essential to the integrity of the SIV program, and process enhancements have resulted in improved efficiency. Administrative processing times for this quarter were exceptionally high because cases dating back to 2015 were processed. We expect these processing times to decline in subsequent quarters as the backlog of older cases is reduced. The longer than previous delay at step 11 of the SIV application process reflects the fact that visa interviews were temporarily suspended during the reporting period due to limited visa numbers remaining for Afghan special immigrant visa applicants.

### **Applications Pending at Each Stage of the SIV Application Process**

As of June 30, 2017, the following numbers of Afghan applicants were pending in one of the application stages:

- Step 1 – 5,313 principal applicants had COM applications pending at NVC, for which the applicant had taken action within the past 120 days. These applicants had submitted some, but not all, of the documents required to apply for COM approval.
- Step 7 – 259 principal applicants had Form I-360 petitions pending with USCIS.
- Step 11 – 2,788 principal applicants and 11,138 family members were pending scheduling for visa interviews. Interviews are normally scheduled approximately 30-60 days in advance. Applicants use this time to gather any remaining documents required for their interviews and prepare for travel to the U.S. embassy or consulate. Most Afghan applicants will be interviewed at Embassy Kabul, as they reside in Afghanistan. Applicants who reside outside of Afghanistan will be interviewed at the U.S. embassy or consulate that adjudicates immigrant visa applications for their country of residence.

- Step 13 – Applications for 733 principal applicants and 70 family members were undergoing administrative processing.

### Number of SIV Applicants in Third Quarter of FY 2017

The following chart shows the number of Afghan applicants who applied for SIVs at a visa interview in the third quarter of FY 2017 under section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, subsequent to receiving COM approval. Visa interviews were temporarily suspended during the reporting period due to limited numbers remaining for Afghan special immigrant visa applicants, and thus no applications were possible during the months of April..

Month	Principal Applicants	Family Members	Total
April	0	0	0
May	75	223	298
June	265	881	1146
<b>Total</b>	<b>340</b>	<b>1104</b>	<b>1444</b>

### Applications Denied or Pending at Each Stage of the SIV Application Process

At the end of the third quarter of FY 2017 the following numbers of applications were denied or pending at one of the application stages:

- 987 Afghan principal applicants were deemed unqualified to receive COM approval or had the approval revoked during the third quarter of FY 2017. Applicants whose COM applications are denied or revoked are able to appeal the decision. 176 Afghans submitted appeals during the third quarter of FY 2017. Of those appeals adjudicated as of August 16, 2017, 25 percent were approved after the applicant submitted additional information.
- 527 Form I-360 petitions were filed by Afghan principal applicants between April 1 and June 30, 2017. Nineteen were denied by USCIS.
- 2,788 principal applicants and 11,138 family members were pending scheduling for visa interviews.
- Applications for 733 principal applicants and 70 family members were undergoing administrative processing.

## **Reasons for COM Denial**

As reflected in denial letters sent by the COM at Embassy Kabul, denial of a COM application generally occurs for one or more of the following four reasons:

- *Failure to establish employment by or on behalf of the U.S. government, or failure to establish qualifying employment by ISAF or a successor mission.* For Afghans employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government, State considers the employment requirement satisfied for an alien hired under a direct-hire appointment, or through an agency's personal services agreement (PSA) or personal services contract (PSC) authority. State also has considered Afghan nationals hired by and paid through a U.S. government contractor, subcontractor, or Employee Association to meet the broader criteria for employment "by or on behalf of" the U.S. government. State has not considered the requirement under section 602(b) to be "employed by or on behalf of the United States government" satisfied in other situations, such as individuals employed by an entity funded by a grant or cooperative agreement with the U.S. government, or self-employed businesspersons who operate under a license with the U.S. government. Afghans employed by ISAF, or a successor mission, must have served in a capacity that required service as an interpreter or translator for U.S. military personnel while traveling off-base with U.S. military personnel stationed at ISAF, or a successor mission, or the performance of sensitive and trusted activities for U.S. military personnel stationed at ISAF, or a successor mission.
- *Failure to establish the required length of employment by or on behalf of the U.S. government, or by ISAF or a successor mission, during the period specified in section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, as amended.* Applicants who submitted applications for COM approval on or before September 30, 2015, must demonstrate one year of qualifying service. Applicants who submitted or submit applications for COM approval on or after October 1, 2015, must demonstrate two years of qualifying service.
- *Failure to establish providing faithful and valuable service to the U.S. government.* Applications denied for this reason generally have involved cases lacking the requisite positive recommendation or evaluation. In some instances where faithful and valuable service was not confirmed, employment by or on behalf of the U.S. government had been terminated for cause.
- *Derogatory information associated with the applicant that is incompatible with the requirements of the SIV program.* This reason for denial generally relates to information that the applicant engaged in an unlawful, unethical, criminal, or terrorism-related activity.

