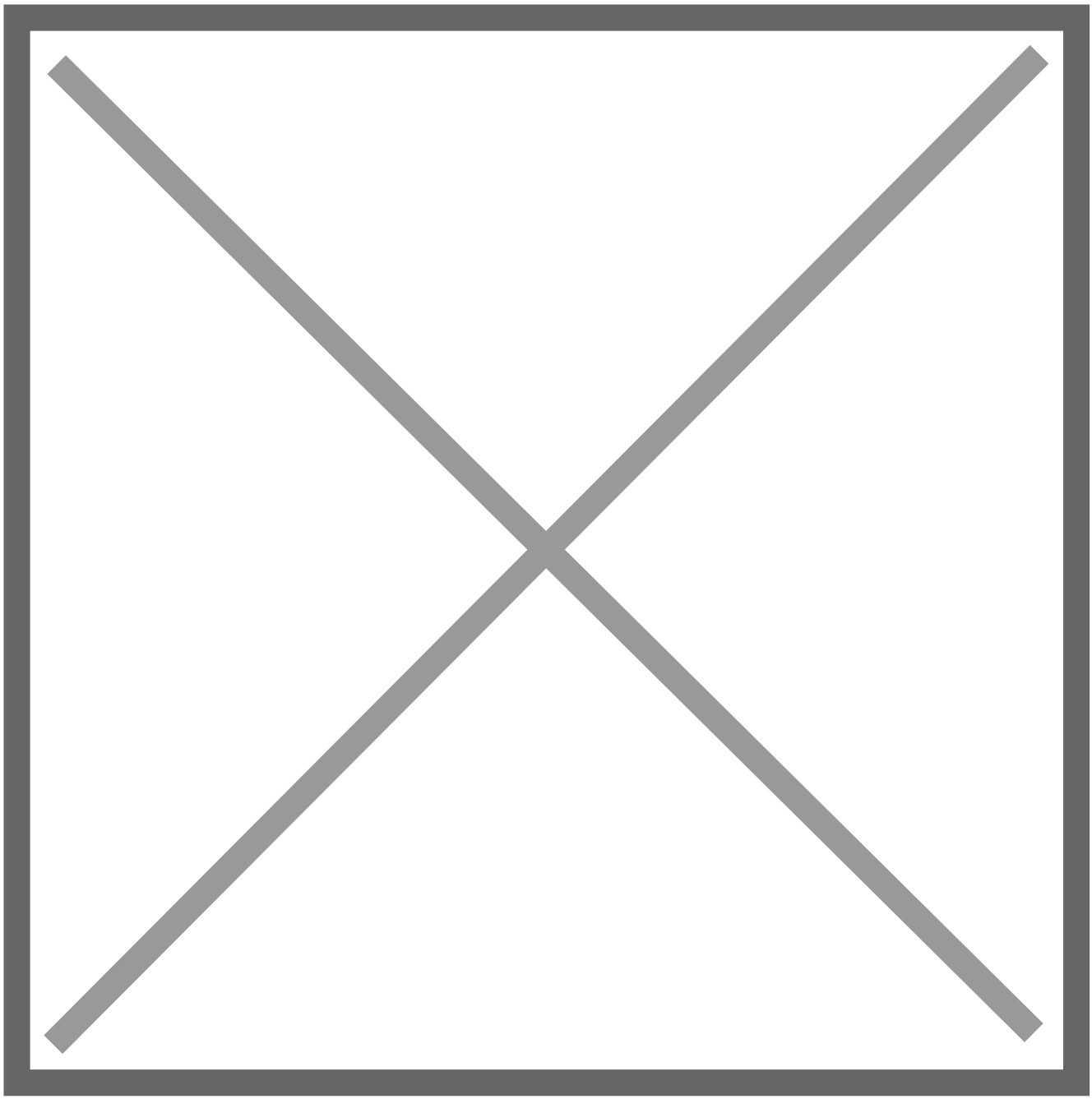


A translator and soldiers from 1st Platoon Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 36th Infantry Regiment take cover from a helicopter's rotor wash in Demaiwand, Afghanistan, Jan. 18, 2013, while evacuating a 10-year-old girl injured by an improvised explosive device that detonated about 875 yards away. (CNS photo/Andrew Burton, Reuters)



by Catholic News Service

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The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and its Migration and Refugee Services "are proud to have the opportunity to welcome and assist those who have kept Americans safe in Afghanistan," said the USCCB president and the chairman of the bishops' migration committee July 30.

Other agencies resettling these newcomers include Catholic Charities USA and other nongovernmental organizations.

"By working with the United States, each of these individuals has put their lives and those of their family and friends at risk. As they now leave everything behind to begin new lives here, the many sacrifices they've made should not go unacknowledged," the two prelates said.

The statement was issued by Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, USCCB president, and Auxiliary Bishop Mario E. Dorsonville of Washington, chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Migration.

According to The Associated Press, a flight landed just after midnight July 30 at Dulles International Airport in Virginia, in suburban Washington, with 221 Afghans who have been allowed into the United States under a special visa program. AP said an internal U.S. government document it had obtained said the group included 57 children and 15 babies.

As of July 7, President Joe Biden's order for the withdrawal of all troops from Afghanistan was essentially complete, about 20 years after troops were first

deployed when President George W. Bush declared war on Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nationals who provided translation, interpretation, security, transportation and other vital services to the U.S. troops in the last two decades have feared reprisals from Afghanistan's Taliban, even more so now as its fighters advance around the country in the absence of the U.S. military.

In 2006, the U.S. Congress first authorized a bipartisan humanitarian program to provide Special Immigrant Visas, or SIVs, for nationals from Afghanistan and Iraq that include resettlement services and legal permanent residence for the approved principal applicants, their spouses and children.

Since the creation of the program, a USCCB news release said, MRS has worked with the U.S. Department of State, the Office of Refugee Resettlement and other nongovernmental organizations to provide resettlement services to some of the over 73,000 Afghan SIV holders and their families.

The USCCB also has advocated periodically before Congress to extend and improve the program.

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On July 14, the White House announced the emergency relocation of Afghan SIV applicants in their final stages of processing to the United States, with the first of that group arriving in the United States July 30.

In addition, Congress passed a bipartisan emergency supplemental appropriations bill July 29, allocating over $1 billion for humanitarian support and assistance; authorizing an additional 8,000 visas for the SIV program; and making some changes to streamline the application process.

The USCCB said it supported the measure and similar ones that Congress considered in recent weeks.

Gomez and Dorsonville said in their statement it is important for the USCCB and MRS to join with other faith-based agencies and her NGOs "to ensure the warm welcome, safe relocation and resettlement of those who have already contributed greatly to our nation."

"We also applaud Congress for coming to an agreement on the emergency supplemental appropriations bill to help ensure that all Afghans who are in danger because they assisted the U.S. receive protection and welcome," they said.

The prelates added the Catholic Church teaches that "each person is created in the image and likeness of God and that we must uphold the inherent dignity of every person."

They quoted Pope Francis, who in emphasizing the faithful's duty to welcome the newcomer, said this is "an invitation to overcome our fears so as to encounter the other, to welcome, to know and to acknowledge him or he. It is an invitation which offers the opportunity to draw near to the other and see where and how he or she lives."