



SAFE PASSAGE. NEW BEGINNINGS.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 20, 2013

PRESS CONTACT
Katherine Reisner
847.561.2676 (cell)
kreisner@refugeerights.org

IRAP HAILS BIPARTISAN REFORM OF VISA PROGRAMS FOR IRAQI AND AFGHAN ALLIES

Heller: *Congress has again proven that it will not stand by as our allies' lives remain endangered*

New York, NY, December 20, 2013 – The Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project welcomes today's passage of landmark bipartisan legislation to extend and improve the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) programs that bring our Iraqi and Afghan allies to safety. On the eve of the Senate's holiday recess, the upper chamber passed provisions as part of this year's National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) extending the Iraqi SIV program for another nine months, and making critical procedural, efficiency, and accountability reforms that will dramatically improve the effectiveness of both programs.

Under the new law, the State Department can continue to process and issue SIVs for Iraqis as long as it takes for a 2,500-visa threshold to be reached. Some of the essential reforms in the bill include greater transparency, authorization for applicants have legal counsel present during their interviews, appointment of senior embassy staff to oversee the reform process, and a requirement for all applications to be completed within 9 months, with an exception for national security concerns.

"On behalf of our hundreds of clients, who live in daily fear because of their work for the United States, we are incredibly grateful to Congress for making these critical changes to ensure that the Special Immigrant Visa program serves its intended purpose of protecting our endangered allies. Yet, although the NDAA makes crucial changes to the programs and extends the Iraqi program, it does not address the imminent expiration of the Afghan SIV program. We look forward to working with Congress and the Administration in the new year to ensure that as the United States pulls out of Afghanistan, we do not abandon the thousands of Afghans risking their lives to support our mission," said Becca Heller, Director of the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project.

"The Special Immigrant Visa program is the lifeline for interpreters and others who risked their lives to work with the U.S. government. While serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, I saw firsthand the courageous and unselfish actions taken by some of the thousands of interpreters who put their lives and their families' lives on the line every day," said Truman Project Executive Director and IRAP co-founder Michael Breen. "As a former U.S. Army Captain, I applaud Congress for championing this program and keeping the promise that this country made to those who served with us. Continuation of the SIV program will provide safe passage to security and the new beginning these men and women rightfully earned in America."

Since 2002, the United States has employed tens of thousands of Iraqi and Afghan citizens as U.S. military interpreters. During firefights and at other times, these interpreters stand shoulder-to-shoulder with U.S. soldiers, making it possible for U.S. troops to succeed in their missions. Unfortunately, our Iraqi and Afghan allies also become the targets of anti-American violence: U.S. military interpreters and their families are frequently abducted and assassinated by Al Qaeda, Iraqi insurgents, and the Taliban.



SAFE PASSAGE. NEW BEGINNINGS.

Congress foresaw this crisis years ago, when it created the two SIV programs to allow worthy Iraqi and Afghan allies to immigrate to the United States. Iraqis and Afghans are eligible for the programs if they have worked closely with U.S. personnel and their lives are now in danger because of that service. Unfortunately, federal agencies have issued only a fraction of the visas that Congress originally authorized. Less than 20% of the visas available to Afghans have been distributed, and less than 30% of the visas available to Iraqis under prior law have been distributed. The need for visas remains as dire as ever. Threats and assassinations have intensified since the U.S. shuttered its bases in Iraq and prepares to do the same in Afghanistan.

Now in the tenth year since the Iraq War, and in a period of reckoning over what our legacy will be in Afghanistan, the United States has an obligation, acknowledged by Congress, to protect those who risked everything for our missions.

“[W]e made a promise to take in those who had served us when the American presence was scaled down and they no longer had our protection,” Rep. Earl Blumenauer, an architect of the original legislation, said in response to the House’s passage of the NDAA. “Now, at least for the next year, we can keep that promise.”

###