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IRAP AND RAICES FILE FOIA ON SIV HOLDERS DETAINED AT AIRPORTS UPON ARRIVAL

(New York, NY) - Last week, the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) and RAICES filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to learn more about how CBP officials at airports handle the inspection, admission, detention, and deportation of arriving Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders.

The filing states that "[o]ver the past two years, IRAP has become aware of an increasing pattern of Special Immigrant Visa holders facing obstacles at U.S. airports upon their arrival. Despite having undergone extensive vetting and demonstrated the existence of serious threats to their safety prior to having their applications approved for travel, many SIV holders have faced lengthy secondary inspection, days-long detention, family separation, and even deportation back to danger in their countries of origin."

IRAP and RAICES have represented SIV applicants during and after the resettlement process for years. Ever since the President issued his first Muslim ban executive order on January 27, 2017, a concerning number of SIV holders have become detained upon arrival in the United States. Even though the current iteration of the Muslim ban does not affect travelers from Afghanistan and Iraq, recent reports suggest that SIV holders are being flagged for secondary inspection and even deported to their home countries, where they face targeted threats and attacks.

"When Afghan and Iraqi allies travel to safety in the U.S., many of them have already been waiting for years in dangerous situations in their home countries," said Elizabeth Foydel, IRAP's Deputy Policy Director. "It is unconscionable to bring them here, only to deny them entry at the last minute and return them to the very situation they were fleeing from. We owe it to these loyal
partners to treat them fairly and with dignity. Our clients and others in their situation deserve to know what is causing these incidents."

“We’ve become increasingly concerned with the detention of SIV holders on arrival,” said Erika Andiola, RAICES’ Chief Advocacy officer. “One of our clients, a former interpreter for the military in Afghanistan, arrived at the Houston airport with his wife and five children and was told immediately on arrival that his visa was denied and he’d be deported. We pushed back and secured his release with the help of legislators, but it shouldn’t take members of Congress weighing in to get justice for those who’ve risked their lives for serving our military.”

In addition to the FOIA request, IRAP and RAICES also circulated a letter signed by Members of Congress Lloyd Doggett, Joaquin Castro, Sheila Jackson Lee, Marc Veasey, and Lizzie Fletcher from Texas, requesting further information from U.S. Customs and Border Protection about the detentions at Houston George Bush Intercontinental Airport and other international airports.

“It should not take so much effort from these families, nonprofits, and congressional offices to secure fair treatment of those who risked their lives to help American troops,” said Congressman Doggett. “In the land of the free, we should provide support for those who have taken these risks for our country in warzones.”

IRAP has also published a number of informational materials for SIV holders and their attorneys to prepare them for their journey to the United States.

To view the press release, click here.

The FOIA filings can be found here.

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