

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

Introduction

The Department of State (“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 significant 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.

State issued 9,741 SIVs to Afghans in Fiscal Year 2019, including 2,347¹ 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 second quarter of FY 2020 are available on travel.state.gov.

The Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020, as enacted on December 20, 2019, authorized 4,000 additional SIVs for Afghan principal applicants, for a total of 22,500 visas allocated since December 19, 2014. As of March 31, 2020, State has issued 15,093 of the available 22,500 SIVs to Afghan principal applicants who are 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.

In response to significant worldwide challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of State temporarily suspended routine visa services at all U.S. Embassies and Consulates in the latter part of the second quarter of FY 2020. Embassies and Consulates continued to provide emergency and mission critical visa services, which includes SIV services, where possible.

Average Processing 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.² 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 DHS; visa interview and security screening; and final visa adjudication (issuance or denial).

¹ Figures include adjustment of status data from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

² The Department of State’s National Visa Center (“NVC”) should not be confused with the National Vetting Center, also known as NVC, established under the National Security Presidential Memorandum 9.

Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Processing Steps ¹			
Stage	Step	Description	Average processing times in calendar days
Chief of Mission (“COM”) application process	1	Applicant submits COM application package to State's NVC.	Applicant-controlled
	2	NVC reviews documents for completeness.	17
	3	NVC sends completed package to the COM Committee at the U.S. Embassy Kabul.	1
	4	The COM Committee reviews the application and makes a decision to approve or deny.	506 ²
	5	The COM Committee advises NVC if the 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.)	1
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. ³	18
Visa interview process,	8	NVC sends instruction packet to applicant requesting standard	8

including pre- and post-interview ⁴		immigrant visa documentation.	
	9	Applicant submits required documentation to NVC.	Applicant-controlled
	10	NVC reviews documents for completeness.	3
	11	NVC schedules applicant for next available interview at the U.S. embassy's consular section.	6
	12	Applicant is interviewed by consular officer on the scheduled appointment date. Administrative processing is initiated following the interview.	4
	13	The applicant's case undergoes administrative processing. ⁵	342
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 requires renewal by the applicant.	Applicant-controlled
		Total U.S. government processing time in calendar days⁶	904
¹ 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.			

² Totals include data for SIV applicants who completed Chief of Mission Committee review between January 1, 2020 to March 31, 2020. The number of cases processed at Step 4 increased by 100 percent from the prior quarter of FY 2020.
³ For I-360 petitions filed with USCIS between January 1, 2020 and March 31, 2020.
⁴ 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.
⁵ Line 13 totals include data only for SIV applicants who completed administrative processing between January 1, 2020 and March 31, 2020. Average processing time does not include cases that remain pending. Pending cases cannot be included in the calculation until they are completed.
⁶ 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.

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, certain 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. At Step 4, COM has cases pending more than nine months due to low program staffing and high caseload volume. Furthermore, the Congressionally-mandated prioritization plan implemented by the Department requires attention focused first on high priority tiers, resulting in lower tiers waiting longer for review and analysis.

Applications Pending at Each Stage of the SIV Application Process

As of March 31, 2020, the following numbers of Afghan applicants were pending in one of the application stages:

- Step 1 – 8,386 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 – 65 principal applicants had Form I-360 petitions pending with USCIS.
- Step 11 – 59 principal applicants and 226 derivative family members were pending scheduling for visa interviews. 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 approximately 234 principal applicants and 45 family derivative members were undergoing administrative processing as of March 29, 2020.

Number of SIV Applicants in the Second Quarter of FY 2020

The following chart shows the number of Afghan applicants who applied for SIVs at a visa interview in the second quarter of FY 2020 under section 602(b) of the *Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009*, as amended, subsequent to receiving COM approval.

Month	Principal Applicants	Derivative Family Members	Total
January	172	643	815
February	151	485	636
March	141	485	626
Total	464	1613	2077

Applications Denied at Each Stage of the SIV Application Process

At the end of the second quarter of FY 2020, the following numbers of applications were denied at one of the application stages:

- 485 Afghan principal applicants were deemed unqualified to receive COM approval or had the approval revoked during the second quarter of FY 2020. Applicants whose COM applications are denied or revoked are able to appeal the decision. 146 Afghans submitted appeals during the second quarter of FY 2020. Of the appeals adjudicated during this quarter, 16 were approved after the applicant submitted additional information.
- USCIS denied three petitions of the 131 Form I-360 petitions were filed by Afghan principal applicants between January 1, 2020 and March 31, 2020.

Reasons for COM Denial

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

- Failure to establish qualifying employment by or on behalf of the U.S. government, or 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 has also 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. For Afghans employed by ISAF, or a successor mission, Section 1227 of the FY 2015 National Defense Authorization Act ("NDAA") states that qualifying applicants must be employed "by the International Security Assistance Force," interpreted to include direct hires by ISAF or ISAF member nations. The NDAA for FY 2017 requires Afghans employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government who submit an application for COM approval on or after December 23, 2016, to further establish that their employment required them to serve as an interpreter or translator for personnel of the Department of State or USAID; to serve as an interpreter or translator for U.S. military personnel; or to perform sensitive and trusted activities for the U.S. government. The NDAA for FY 2020, signed on December 20, 2019, removed these additional requirements.
- Insufficient documentation.* Applications are denied for this reason if the applicant fails to provide a required document, or if there is a deficiency in a document provided by the applicant.
- 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.