

‘ALL KINDS OF NEGATIVE REPERCUSSIONS’

In wake of D.C. shooting, federal government turns away from U.S. humanitarian legacy, allies in Afghanistan



JESSE TINSLEY/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW Kazim Abdullahi, an immigrant from Afghanistan who is now a naturalized U.S. citizen, stands in his home Friday in Spokane. Behind him on the television is a YouTube image of the presidential palace in Afghanistan.

BY NICK GIBSON THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Kazim Abdullahi was recently exploring career opportunities with U.S. military forces overseas.

It's a field in which he has experience: Abdullahi spent five years as an interpreter embedded with U.S. troops at the height of the conflict in his birth country of Afghanistan.

But despite the inherent dangers of his work and his loyalty to the United States, he's now nervous about working abroad as Afghan refugees are being subjected to a crackdown following the recent shooting of two National Guard members in Washington, D.C.

Abdullahi said he has halted his plans and ambitions for that line of work since he's not sure what his return to American soil would look like, despite establishing his citizenship years ago.

“What if I go there, work with the Army, and came back and got arrested by ICE, saying ‘Oh sorry, we thought you were an illegal immigrant,’” Abdullahi said. “I mean, what is going on here in the United States?”

But it's in Abdullahi's nature to give back, he said. And he has a deep appreciation for “everything this country has done for me.”

Abdullahi is not alone in his concern for his future, or the sweeping implications of the Trump administration's recent policies surrounding immigration, refugee resettlement and asylum.

Following the shooting that killed Sarah Beckstrom, 20, and wounded another National Guardsman, the Trump administration halted all asylum applications, stated their intentions to review the more than 50,000 applicants approved under the Biden administration, issued a travel ban and paused immigration applications for foreign nationals from 19 countries and ended any path for Afghans.

The shooter, 29-year-old Rahmanullah Lakanwal, was an Afghan national who received asylum in April as a former member of a CIA paramilitary group at the tail end of the war, as reported by the New York Times.

Abdullahi said the violence fills him with a deep sadness, as someone who chooses “peace, love and respect,” but also due to the way in which the tragedy is being politicized.

“As an Afghan who’s been here in the U.S. for many years, my heart hurts for those families and the National Guard members and everyone who is affected,” Abdullahi said.

“I just want to make one thing clear, that this or any other violent act, does not represent Afghan people, or our communities in Spokane, who are working really hard for the people around them,” he stressed.

The sweeping changes effectively ended all legal paths to immigration for Afghan nationals, including to a program devoted to those who served U.S. interests abroad like Abdullahi.

Abdullahi arrived in the U.S. through the same Special Immigration Visa program halted by the Trump administration.

The program, specifically for those who helped the U.S. military and its allies, is a long and complicated process in which candidates are vetted by U.S. intelligence agencies. Abdullahi and his wife waited more than three years before receiving approval, he said.

While he and his peers who assisted U.S. troops may face a greater security risk if they were to ever return to Afghanistan, there’s ample risk for even those who used other paths to immigrate to the U.S. from a country under Taliban rule.

“I know for a fact, if you start sending people back to the country, it’s going to cause a lot of safety and security issues for those families,” Abdullahi said. “Because now we are labeling them ‘Oh, this person deported from the United States.’ Now you’re going to cause harm. You’re going to double everything. You’re going to hand over those people to the Taliban, people who were blacklisted with the Taliban, people who the Taliban were waiting for this moment.”

Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker said people such as Abdullahi who worked alongside the U.S. military saved “countless” American lives in what was a “messy political affair.”

“They could read the political and psychological terrain in a way that no American ever could,” Crocker said.

The shooting of National Guardsmen was a horrific tragedy, he said, but he bristles at the way it is being used to “demonize or dehumanize an entire nationality.” That’s inconsistent with American values, and it does not serve American strategic interests, he said.

Anyone who’s spent time in the country, among the Afghan people, knows that most are aspiring for a better life – the same security, stability, economic opportunity and strong education system that American families strive for, Crocker said. He’d like to see avenues to resettlement promptly restored.

“If he is found guilty of this awful crime, he should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law,” Crocker said. “But to go beyond that, to say that an entire nationality, or even further beyond that, an entire category of people everywhere, those seeking one form or another of refugee status, especially those who have served the United States under very dangerous circumstances, that is a form of collective punishment that I think has all kinds of negative repercussions for us, domestically and internationally.”

It’s a globalized world, Crocker said, so the message sent by the newly enacted policies could have broad ramifications for U.S. foreign interests. In the event of another conflict, there will be fewer locals willing to help.

“And there will be another contingency when we need that invaluable, in-depth, local perspective on a complex battlefield,” Crocker said.

U.S. Rep. Michael Baumgartner, R-Spokane, just so happens to be one of those people Crocker alluded to. His stint in Afghanistan started in 2008 with a civilian contractor role on a team of international counter-narcotics advisors in Afghanistan.

It’s where he met his wife, Eleanor, and where the two later worked on a project to encourage the region’s poppy farmers to transition to food production.

Baumgartner said he knows firsthand the way in which Afghans stepped forward to help America “in our efforts to help Afghanistan.”

They did so under threat from the Taliban and extremist groups – a still prevalent reality that was exacerbated by the “reckless nature of the way in which the withdrawal from Afghanistan was carried out by the Biden administration,” he said.

Those individuals should still have a path to life in America, Baumgartner said, so long as they pass a rigorous vetting process. Some aspects of Afghan culture are “not compatible with American culture,” and he wants the U.S. to ensure those who are welcomed to the U.S. are able to assimilate.

“But the killings, as tragic as they are, and they are indeed tragic, don’t change my overall view that there are still Afghans that stepped forward to help America, and that they should be given refugee status,” Baumgartner said. “Similar to the way Vietnamese allies in the aftermath of the Vietnam War were, in America.”

Abdullahi said the future is full of uncertainty for the Afghan community, nationally and locally.

He still volunteers his time as an interpreter, mostly for families immigrating into the country, which means he’s well-connected in the community. Many are worried about stepping into public, he said, pointing to some locals who opted to stay in over the holiday weekend instead of grabbing a dinner or shopping Black Friday deals.

That hurts Spokane’s economy and local government services propped up by tax dollars, as well as its sense of community.

He said those fearful in the current climate are, like himself, multifaceted and contribute to quality of life in a variety of ways. Abdullahi is close to receiving his master’s degree in cybersecurity and hopes to become a professor, while also volunteering his time and pursuing national and global recognition at karate competitions.

“This time is just tough for everyone,” Abdullahi said. “It’s not just for the Afghan community, it’s not just for any one community. This is a tough time for the United States. This is a tough time for Spokane.”

Abdullahi agrees that some immigration reform is needed, but he wants

those enacting policies at the federal level to keep in mind the sacrifices made by those who assisted the U.S. abroad, and the responsibility the country has to ensure the safety of those individuals in return.

“You brought them to the United States to be safe, and now you’re labeling those people and sending them back to Afghanistan,” Abdullahi said. “It just doesn’t make sense. These are people here who are paying their taxes, who are loyal to the country, who are obeying the law.”

As the policies continue to develop, he also hopes those currently with legal status to work in the United States are not left in the lurch.

On Thursday, the Trump administration announced it would reduce the length of work permits from five years to 18 months for refugees, asylum seekers and those already granted asylum.

The decision affects any new applicants as of Dec. 5, and the 434,000 asylum seekers, 12,000 refugees and 24,000 people granted asylum nationally who were awaiting authorization to work as of June, as reported by the New York Times.

The changes to work permits were made as much of the system already is held up by the policies enacted the week of the shooting. Those whose permits that have expired or may be expiring soon are currently unable to renew their authorization, causing a lot of financial strife among Afghans living in the U.S., Abdullahi said. He wants to see the federal or state government step in with assistance as the immigration system is at a standstill.

If not, he hopes the Inland Northwest community steps up to show support, a sentiment shared by Crocker.

The former diplomat recalled when the first wave of Afghan refugees through the special immigrant visa program arrived in Spokane to great fanfare. David Condon, the Republican-leaning mayor at the time, attended the ceremony to show support that was “not typical of the Republican Party nationwide,” Crocker said.

“This area is pretty hard to type: red, blue, purple,” Crocker said. “What it is is contrarian, and it runs against the grain.”

“Spokane has always been unique,” he added.

“I just hope that other voices are going to stand up for those refugees that have faced real danger, and especially those who have incurred danger to themselves and their families by their service to the United States.”

Nick Gibson can be reached at (509) 459-5039 or by email at nickg@spokesman.com.