

Open letter to the prime minister and the minister for foreign affairs of Australia

As your locally engaged staff members, we are scattered across Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. We face many challenges and different issues caused by the Australian government.

We write to you with this information now as we are deeply affected by the lack of response, including no response to help evacuate vulnerable Afghan from Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan who worked for the Australian mission in Afghanistan.

We are the individuals most at risk of violence and reprisals following the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Despite the collective efforts by Dfat and home affairs, and despite their identification process of local engaged staff members, few of the "at risk" Afghans employees have been supported and have been evacuated to Australia, and a very large number remain in grave danger in Afghanistan and some in Pakistan.

In many cases, the Taliban have arrested these people and are under continuous surveillance, some members have been killed while others are detained, and some have been released in support to join or provide assistance to the Taliban.

There are many issues in relation to our visa application and LEE (Locally Engaged Employee) certification by DFAT but the most important one's are indicated below:

First, there is lack of clarity by Dfat and home affairs regarding locally engaged staff and processing their application. For many LEE members, it has taken more than one year to be certified by Dfat. We wonder what makes our humanitarian issues less valuable than others.

The second issue is that LEE members who have been certified by DFAT and requested to relocate to Pakistan. These people have been relocated to Pakistan and have been waiting for more than 8 months with no support by Dfat and home affairs. Dfat and home affairs indicates there is shortage of processing capacity within these organisations. However, the whole LEE team in Pakistan is less than 15 people: we wonder how the Australian government cannot process 15 people from Pakistan.

Third, LEE members stranded in Afghanistan have been facing tremendous threats by the Taliban. Some people who worked for the Australian mission have been rejected from applying for the LEE visa, while a large number have been waiting for the minister's approval for 12 months.

Australia announced refugee places for vulnerable Afghan people including prioritising locally engaged employees. Australia pledged to protect individuals who supported Australia. But there is little evidence that Australia has supported LEE and other vulnerable people either in Afghanistan or other third countries, such as Pakistan.