

25 August 2021

The Hon Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister

Re: Australian leadership on the situation in Afghanistan

As the Chief Executive Officer of Uniting Vic.Tas, I am writing to ask your government to consider taking immediate action on the devastating situation in Afghanistan.

Uniting Vic.Tas is the community services organisation of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania. We are more than 6,000 people delivering hundreds of services accessed nearly 200,000 times each year across Victoria and Tasmania. We work across the full spectrum of community services, intervening early to help people avoid crisis, as well as supporting those who live life at the margins.

Uniting has been delivering the Komak program for more than three years and has overcome many barriers to establish a strong reputation in the Afghan community, earning the trust of community leaders and members in a way no other general multicultural program has done previously in this area.

Komak is designed to build relationships and resilience within the Afghan community in south-east Melbourne. "Komak" (meaning "help" or "support" in Dari) is a specialised service that champions the Afghan community. Together with the community, our team works to develop resilience and build community connection. With a focus on reducing isolation, Komak provides services to individuals, families, their peers, community leaders and professionals – everyone can reach out and receive support.

Uniting's Asylum Seeker Welcome Centre creates a safe and welcoming space for people seeking asylum in Melbourne to aid connection, inclusion and practical assistance. We also provide ongoing support through our Humanitarian Settlement Program, Status Resolution Support Services, Asylum Seeker Project, Communities for Children and now our specialised stream of Jobs Victoria Employment Services targeting migrants and newly arrived communities. Our Settlement Hub in Shepparton provides ongoing support for individuals and families who have been in Australia for less than five years to make the settlement process easier.

Support programs for newly arrived migrants are integrated with and work in tandem with Uniting's broad service portfolio to support migrants and foster social participation and economic and personal wellbeing and community connections. Our regional settlement programs have capacity to support higher numbers of entrants where needed.

Right now, our staff are inundated with calls from consumers needing emotional support following the recent events in Afghanistan, whilst also grappling with the impact of ongoing COVID-19 lockdowns.

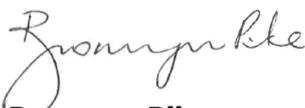
Uniting stands with our consumers, other organisations, businesses, and community groups in Australia to call upon the government to take seven urgent and practical steps to provide safety and leadership on the situation in Afghanistan.

1. Do everything possible in coming days to **evacuate people who are at grave risk** within Afghanistan, including those who have worked for or assisted the Australian Government and Australian organisations (including the embassy, armed forces, NGOs and media), human rights defenders and women and girls whose lives and security are under great threat.
2. **Urge governments in the region to keep borders open** for people trying to flee persecution in Afghanistan, particularly Pakistan and Iran.
3. Offer **additional refugee resettlement places** for Afghan refugees immediately, as the Australian Government did in 2015 with 12,000 additional places for Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Canada has already announced its commitment of 20,000 additional places for Afghan refugees. Australia could match this offer and urge other resettlement states to do the same, sending a strong and positive message to states receiving Afghan refugees that the world is ready to share responsibility in the protection of lives at risk.
4. As many people are now at risk from hunger and lack of shelter due to their forced displacement, immediately **increase Australian aid to the region** to support programs to assist people who have been displaced across borders and, wherever possible, support organisations still offering assistance within Afghanistan.
5. We welcome the extension of temporary visas of all Afghan citizens in Australia announced by Immigration Minister Alex Hawke on 17 August. A vital next step is to ensure that people whose asylum claims have been previously rejected be **supported to submit new claims in light of the changed circumstances in Afghanistan**.
6. **Extend permanent protection to 4300 Afghans on temporary protection visas**, recognising that members of this group are unlikely to be able to return in safety for many years to come and need the assurance that they can continue to live in Australia without the constant fear of forced return.
7. Assist Afghan Australians, including people with temporary and permanent protection visas, with **urgent family reunion applications** for relatives who are at particular risk, as members of minorities targeted by the Taliban or people likely to be targeted because of their connections to western nations. This should include giving priority to finalising family reunion applications which have previously been lodged but are waiting on a decision from the Department of Home Affairs.

Our consumers are also very concerned that Australia will recognise the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan before they become signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children.

I urge your government to stand with our communities and take immediate action.

Yours sincerely



Bronwyn Pike
Chief Executive Officer