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Daphne Bramham: Canada's promise to resettle Afghans is falling far short

A documentary filmmaker's efforts to save the Afghans who helped her are being frustrated by bad policies and an overwhelmed system.

By [Daphne Bramham](#)

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Alison MacLean is trying to rescue Afghans who helped her during more than a decade of doing documentary films in that country. This photo was taken in 2010 in Kandahar, while MacLean was embedded with Canadian troops, during shooting of *Outside the Wire* for W Television. PNG

Documentary filmmaker Alison MacLean is in an epic struggle to rescue the people who helped her during more than a decade of work in Afghanistan.

It turns out the biggest obstacle is Canada, even though Ottawa promised to resettle 40,000 Afghan interpreters, judges, journalists and human rights activists who are now being hunted by the Taliban.

Last fall as the Taliban stormed into Kabul, MacLean used her extensive network of contacts to help three families flee. The family of one of her “fixers” includes his wife and three children under seven years of age. The other fixer has his widowed mother and 11-year-old sister with him. The third family includes a women’s rights activist, her adult son and 14-year-old daughter.

Their journeys have included a terrifying trip from a safe house to the Kabul airport. Using her military contacts, MacLean secured seats for them on one of the final flights to the United States.



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During the four hours they waited, trying to gain entry to the airport, they saw men and women being beaten. They described it to

MacLean who remained on the phone the whole time, relaying to them the risk assessments being texted to her from military contacts.

The final text was stark: Get them out now. There is going to be another suicide bomber attack.

A prior attack had killed at least 183 people and injured more than 150 others.



Three Afghan refugees in Iran who are being helped by Alison MacLean. PNG

They fled with the Taliban following them, but they managed to get to the first of a series of safe houses where they sheltered for nearly five months, while MacLean helped arrange for papers to get them out.

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In January, they drove across Afghanistan through dozens of Taliban checkpoints before crossing the Iranian border on foot and then boarding a train for a 15-hour trip to Tehran.

Iran was safe enough for MacLean's families. But Canada has no diplomatic presence there, nor does the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

In October, MacLean flew to Doha, Qatar, which she described as "the new Switzerland."

"Everything is happening there," she said in a telephone interview from her Kamloops home. "The Taliban high command are there. The U.S. military is based there. There are human traffickers and they're all living luxurious lives, which is such a contrast with Afghanistan."

The filmmaker had hoped the Canadian embassy there could help with securing visas for the families. But instead of meeting with her, the ambassador arranged for three men to meet MacLean at a juice bar in the marketplace.

After arriving an hour late, the contract employees refused to show their identification and then, she said, brusquely

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told her to go home before she created an international incident.

“I was really disappointed and it was not pleasant,” she said. “The embassy is supposed to offer assistance, and I was just asking for information.”

So, with Doha out, MacLean arranged for the families to relocate to Pakistan, hoping that the Canadian High Commission in Islamabad would be a better option.

To get there, MacLean plotted a circuitous train trip around Afghanistan using her father’s Second World War maps.

But just days before they left Tehran, one family balked at going to Pakistan, which once harboured the Taliban and where rival fundamentalist groups have recently launched attacks.

Instead, the human rights activist chose to go back to Afghanistan. The Taliban, at least, are the devil she knows.

They are now in hiding, but MacLean is making plans to move them to Greece where a White Rock Rotary Club member has offered free use of her vacation home.

By the end of March, only 10,000 Afghans had arrived in Canada, leaving 30,000 trapped and in hiding in Afghanistan or stuck waiting in another country.

MacLean is not the only one frustrated with the stultifyingly slow process. Over the past year, the Veterans Transition Network raised \$3.6 million and helped rescue 2,061 former military and diplomatic staff and their families from Afghanistan.

This week, they gave up and went back to their core function of helping Canadian veterans transition to civilian life.

The problem isn't the hard-working staff at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, VTN executive-director Oliver Thorne told the Globe and Mail. It's that they are "hog-tied by policy that is just not aligned with the real needs of this evacuation."

He said, "What we are seeing is a government policy that is very risk-averse to the point of being selfish, and it is affecting organizations like ours."

Last week, Immigration Minister Sean Fraser came to Vancouver to talk about waiving restrictions to get Ukrainians more quickly to Canada, including delaying their biometric security screening until arrival.

So, what about the Afghans? The best he could do was promise that 40,000 would be resettled by the end of 2023. He said “extraordinary challenges” and “unique concerns” make extracting and processing Afghan applications difficult.

MacLean shares the anger, frustration and heartbreak of other advocates, including those who have been providing survival support to the families — her own family, friends, and members of the White Rock Rotary Club.

That has been a struggle, but it was made worse when two Christian resettlement agencies reneged on promises to sponsor two of the families. Fortunately, Rotary Club members and MacLean’s team of 25 volunteers agreed to form groups of five and apply as private sponsors for the three families.

As a Canadian, MacLean said it is embarrassing that the government has promised so much and done so little for Afghans, including the fixers, translators and activists who risked their lives to help MacLean tell their stories in her documentaries, *Outside The Wire*, and *Burkas2Bullets*.

Helping them now, she said, is the least she can do.

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