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Notes from editor (not for publication):

These poor people. Our poor country.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 DC shooting raises concerns for Afghans living in
2 Vermont

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 Advocates look to protect local Afghan community from
4 federal backlash

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 For the approximately 200 Afghan refugees who are now
7 living, working, making friends, and paying taxes in Windham
8 County, an undeniable chill is in the air.
9 On Nov. 26, Rahmanullah Lakanwal, 29 — once part of
10 a “Zero Unit,” a secret set of units of Afghans who operated
11 under CIA direction and whose dangerous mandate in

12 Afghanistan was to track down and kill Taliban leaders — has
13 been accused of using his skills to shoot two West Virginia
14 National Guard members in Washington, D.C.

15 One of the service members, Sarah Beckstrom, 20, later
16 died, while Andrew Wolfe, 24, remains hospitalized in serious
17 condition. Lakanwal was arrested and is being held for the crime.
18 An investigation is underway.

19 But as the nation mourns the shootings, thousands of
20 other legally vetted Afghans who entered the U.S. since it left
21 Afghanistan in 2021 are living in fear.

22 Then, on Nov. 27, United States Citizenship and
23 Immigration Services (USCIS) Director Joseph B. Edlow
24 announced on the social platform X, that, at the direction of
25 President Donald Trump, “I have directed a full scale, rigorous
26 reexamination of every Green Card for every alien from every
27 country of concern.”

28 One of the “countries of concern” is Afghanistan.

29 On Thanksgiving night, Trump vowed to “permanently
30 pause migration from all Third World Countries to allow the U.S.
31 system to fully recover.”

32 Since at least June 4, Trump has been trying, through a
33 presidential proclamation, to restrict the entry into this country of
34 foreign nationals from Afghanistan, as well as 11 other countries:
35 Burma, Chad, Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea,
36 Haiti, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen.

37 And on Dec. 1, the Trump administration paused all
38 immigration applications from Afghan nationals.

39 In response, Sen. Mark Kelly, D-Arizona, said on CNN
40 that the Trump administration is “harassing” Afghan migrants
41 through its crackdown on those from the country.

42 “Going after a large group of people, most of which I
43 think are just trying to live their lives, raise their families, go to
44 work every day, the U.S. government harassing them years later
45 does not make a lot of sense to me,” Kelly said.

Immediately after the shooting, immigrant communities sprang into action, condemning the shooting.

The Lapis Social and Cultural Association of the Greater Washington D.C. area, whose mission is to “foster cultural understanding, strengthen the bonds of community, and preserve the rich traditions of our Afghan heritage,” sent out a letter on Nov. 28 saying, “We condemn, in the strongest possible terms, the heinous and violent act committed against two members of the National Guard in Washington, D.C.”

The organization emphasized that “evil carries no passport and does not represent a culture...The actions of a criminal individual do not, and will never, represent the soul and collective conscience of the Afghanistan community.”

Vermont responds

On the local level, the president’s response to the shooting directly impacts Vermont, which has resettled approximately 650 Afghan refugees, about one-third of them in Windham County.

On Dec. 2, Gov. Phil Scott issued a statement saying the state should continue to welcome vetted refugees.

“Many of our Afghan friends and neighbors served side by side with Americans fighting terrorists in their homeland and both they and their families faced extreme danger in doing so,” Scott said.

He said that he has met with members of the Afghan refugee community and that he continues to believe “we’ve done the right thing and should continue to welcome vetted refugees to Vermont and encourage them to pursue citizenship.”

“These individuals have an extraordinary track record of achieving economic independence and making positive contributions in our communities,” Scott said. “I’m proud of them and of the Vermonters who have stepped up to help them build stable, independent lives.”

79 The shooting in Washington, however, is a reminder that
80 people, especially people involved in warfare, can become
81 violent for inexplicable reasons, Scott said.

82 “Although there’s no excuse for what happened,” Scott
83 said, “it’s also not fair to cast blame on an entire group of people
84 who are doing the best they can to integrate into our
85 communities and follow the American dream.”

86 The governor also said he finds it just as “reasonable and
87 prudent for the federal government to investigate to be sure there
88 are no additional security concerns or vulnerabilities in our
89 systems.”

90 “It is important that America have a secure,
91 compassionate, legal immigration system that prioritizes
92 protecting our allies when they need us most,” Scott said.

93 Molly Gray, the executive director of the Vermont Afghan
94 Alliance, also sent out a news release condemning the shooting.

95 While she agreed that “the act of one individual, on his
96 own, cannot be attributed to an entire community or nationality,”
97 she continued on to say that Trump’s “deeply harmful” response
98 “spreads misinformation about Afghan allies and veterans who
99 risked everything for this country.”

100 Afghans risked their lives in services to U.S. military and
101 diplomatic missions over a 21-year period in Afghanistan, Gray
102 said.

103 “These individuals face persecution by the Taliban for
104 their loyalty to the U.S. and fled everything — including family
105 — for safety here,” Gray said.

106 “Today, Afghan allies across Vermont work tirelessly to
107 rebuild their new lives, grow Vermont’s workforce and tax base,
108 contribute to the Vermont economy, and the vibrancy of dozens
109 of Vermont communities.”

110 “Afghan allies are our neighbors, our friends, and
111 colleagues. Today, and over the coming days, we hope all
112 Vermonters will join us in statements of compassion and support
113 for Afghan veterans and allies — our newest Vermonters.

114 To the Afghan community we serve: We thank you for
115 your service, we recognize your incredible strength and
116 contributions,” Gray said. “We stand with you.”

117 **Helping where possible**

118 Joe Wiah, the refugee resettlement director of the
119 Ethiopian Community Development Council’s (ECDC) Vermont
120 office in Brattleboro, also issued a statement that condemned the
121 shooting as “tragic.”

122 “ECDC Vermont strongly condemns this senseless act of
123 violence,” Wiah wrote. “Those responsible should be held
124 accountable under the full weight of the law, and our thoughts
125 and prayers are with the victims and their families. While we
126 await additional guidance before issuing a comprehensive
127 statement, we want to keep you informed about what we
128 currently know.”

129 He cited the freeze on the adjustment of status
130 applications for Afghan nationals, a “proposed pause on
131 migration from ‘third world countries’ to allow the U.S. system to
132 ‘fully recover from policies that had eroded the gains and living
133 conditions of many Americans,’” and a pledge to end all federal
134 benefits and subsidies to noncitizens.

135 Wiah also cited the USCIS’s decision to review green
136 cards issued to those “third world countries.”

137 “We understand this news may cause concern and
138 anxiety,” Wiah wrote. “Please know that ECDC Vermont remains
139 committed to supporting you during this uncertain time. Our
140 entire community — immigrants and non-immigrants alike — has
141 demonstrated remarkable resilience through challenges before,
142 and we will continue to stand together.”

143 Wiah asked any immigrants contacted by USCIS to get in
144 touch with him or their immigration attorney.

145 “ECDC is here to support you every step of the way,”
146 Wiah wrote. “We are monitoring the situation closely and will
147 provide updates as more information becomes available. Please

148 do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns.
149 Together, we remain strong. We ask our entire community to
150 keep one another in their thoughts and prayers during this time.”

151 So far, Wiah told *The Commons*, his agency has received
152 no instructions from the federal government to re-examine
153 immigration applications from Afghan nationals.

154 “The only policy statements so far are a pause on all
155 asylum decisions,” Wiah said. “We haven’t yet received
156 notification from the federal government to re-examine or inspect
157 any of our clients.”

158 He said he is very concerned about the president’s
159 actions in the aftermath of the shootings.

160 “Our population is concerned and, especially, the
161 Afghan population,” he said. “Right now, there are a lot of fears
162 and concerns going on. Right now we are trying to provide some
163 support and information to them, because there’s a lot of fear and
164 trauma.”

165 Wiah reiterated that Afghans risked their lives for the
166 United States.

167 “Most of the refugees that are coming from Afghanistan
168 are special immigrant visa holders,” Wiah said. “These were folks
169 that worked directly with the U.S. military, just like this person
170 who committed this horrific crime. They have sacrificed their
171 lives, and because of that, they can’t return to Afghanistan. They
172 have given support to the U.S. government and to our country.”

173 They are now facing a difficult conundrum, Wiah said.

174 “They cannot go home to Afghanistan, and yet here they
175 are, being brushed with the same brush because of the acts of
176 one person who we condemn,” Wiah said.

177 **Fitting into the community**

178 Since they arrived, the Afghan population has settled into
179 Windham County’s community life and is making its mark on the
180 community — literally, in the case of the Artlords, a creative

181 collective from Kabul whose murals decorate many Brattleboro
182 walls.

183 New Americans are also working at jobs ranging from
184 the check-out counters at local supermarkets to cleaning houses
185 to doing carpentry in private homes. They are preparing and
186 selling Afghan food in different locales, and working at
187 Cersosimo Lumber. They are also involved in health care, serving
188 in the area's nursing homes and at Brattleboro Memorial
189 Hospital.

190 All the Afghan individuals who have resettled in
191 Brattleboro who applied have been granted asylum status, Wiah
192 said.

193 "As you may know, asylum recipients must wait one year
194 from the date their asylum is granted before becoming eligible to
195 apply for a green card," Wiah said.

196 "Currently, our Afghan population falls into three
197 categories: Some have already received their green cards, others
198 have submitted applications and are awaiting processing, and
199 those who arrived more recently have not yet reached the one-
200 year eligibility threshold."

201 Wiah could not provide specific numbers.

202 Nanci Leitch of Guilford is one of the many volunteers
203 here who have worked to help the Afghans resettle. She now
204 mentors two families.

205 "I started off as being kind of a Welcome Wagon —
206 unofficially, you know," Leitch said.

207 She and her husband, Brian Remer, would drive up to
208 the School for International Training, where the Afghan
209 immigrants initially stayed and were acclimated to life in their
210 new country, and invite new arrivals on a tour of the area and
211 "just get you off campus."

212 "That's how we started getting involved, just thinking
213 what we would enjoy doing with the refugees after the Afghans
214 came," Leitch said.

215 One of the families she is close with has been trying to
216 reunite with nine of their 10 children who were separated from
217 them while boarding planes to leave Afghanistan.

218 “They were all at the airport on the on the day they were
219 trying to leave, and then the suicide bombs happened,” Leitch
220 said. “There was a suicide bomber at the gate when the Afghans
221 were trying to pack onto as many planes as they could, to get
222 out.”

223 A bomb went off.

224 “And the family got separated. The parents got pushed
225 onto one plane, and they thought the kids would be on another.
226 But they never were,” Leitch said. “So the older kids have been
227 raising the younger kids in hiding in Afghanistan.”

228 The children have already had immigration hearings,
229 bringing them one step closer to reuniting them with their
230 families.

231 “And that’s right when Trump said, ‘I am banning all
232 Afghans’ or whatever he said,” Leitch said. “But because they’d
233 already been pre-approved, they shouldn’t have been prevented
234 from coming on that basis, right? The whole, ‘Oh, they’re all
235 terrorists.’ That basis. So there is now a lawsuit for all these
236 asylees.”

237 The Trump administration “is not following U.S. or
238 international law about refugees and how this is all supposed to
239 work,” she said.

240 “So, long story short, we continue to be involved,
241 because there is always hope that somehow, we were going to
242 make this work, where they could join the parents. And I guess
243 we’re losing hope now. This is like the last straw.”

244 The Afghans she knows are kind, hard-working and
245 trustworthy people, said Leitch, who did not want to identify any
246 family by name because of possible retaliation from ICE (U.S.
247 Immigration and Customs Enforcement).

248 "They are widely loved in Brattleboro, starting with their
249 English teachers," she said. "They're delightful, joyous people,
250 even though they've got this tremendous weight on them."

251 The father of this family has been working seven days a
252 week, and even nights, to send money home to support his
253 children as well as to build a life here.

254 "And they're both great cooks," Leitch said. "They love to
255 make food for people, both for their Afghan community and to
256 introduce their many Brattleboro friends to their cuisine. The wife
257 has started her own sort of food subscription business."

258 The Brattleboro area has been so welcoming to refugees
259 that it has achieved a nationwide reputation for kindness, Leitch
260 said.

261 "All the Afghans here love Brattleboro," she said, noting
262 that some have left and presumed that they would find other parts
263 of the country equally accommodating.

264 They weren't. And now the new Americans-in-waiting
265 are coming back to Brattleboro.

266 "I just heard another family is coming back, and those
267 here are telling their relatives, 'You know, you should really come
268 to Brattleboro. This is where they really look after the Afghan
269 community, and they welcome us here,'" Leitch said. "They really
270 feel supported and loved.

271 "I just hope that we're up to doing what we need to do to
272 protect them in this next phase," she added.

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