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Afghan Interpreter Rejected by Canada Says He's Been Hunted by Taliban

OTTAWA—An Afghan interpreter turned away from Canada says he has been hunted by insurgents on motorcycles because of his work with the Canadian military.

Sayed Shah Sharifi disputes the accounts of Canadian officials who have played down the threat he faces for aiding allied forces in Kandahar.

Indeed, Sharifi, 23, says he was forced to move his family out of Kandahar for more than two months last year for safety after motorcycle-borne insurgents left a chilling warning with his father.

“Your son works with the Canadian Forces and we will kill him,” Sharifi recalled Wednesday in a telephone interview with the *Star*.

It's because of those dangers that the Canadian government agreed to offer safe haven for 450 interpreters and their family members — later increased to 550 — by letting them settle in Canada.

But Sharifi — despite bravery on the battlefield and commendations from the military men he served — was rejected by Canadian officials, who questioned whether he was truly in danger.

And now he appears caught in a bureaucratic morass in Ottawa as military and immigration officials point fingers at each other over his fate.

Military officials have quietly voiced frustration and accused the immigration department for leaving Sharifi at risk in Afghanistan.

But Wednesday, Immigration Minister Jason Kenney suggested his own department's role in the program was minimal, while defending the overall process as “fair.”

Kenney said only people from the three departments active in Canada's Afghan mission — the military, foreign affairs, and international development aid — sit on the joint referral committee that decides whether applicants are eligible for entry under the interpreters' admission program.

“In fact, a CIC (Citizenship and Immigration Canada) official doesn’t even sit on the committee that makes the decisions,” Kenney said. “There were three decisions in this particular case — I believe that they were unanimous from the panel.

“We gave this gentleman who, you know, we thank for his service — we gave him extra opportunities to apply. And in each instance the panel, which includes DND, reviewed his application, said he did not meet the criteria. And it would be unfair for everyone else who didn’t meet the criteria for us to pick and choose people.”

Kenney said decisions are “based on the facts that people present. And if they demonstrate that they face individualized risk, and they worked for us for a year or more, then they would qualify for the program.”

A government source said later that the final decision issued by a joint referral committee that reviews each application is signed off by a representative from the military — almost always a general — and from foreign affairs.

“CIC has not made a decision about this guy, CIC has never been asked to make a decision about this guy. The JRC has the power to do whatever it wants,” the source said.

In a timeline of Sharifi’s case provided by the immigration department, it’s clear that officials repeatedly doubted his claims — made on paper and in person — that his work helping the Canadians had left him at risk of reprisals.

“His threat narrative, despite its compelling nature, was found to be inconsistent and confusing,” Canadian officials concluded at one point.

But Sharifi said Wednesday that threatening phone calls and actual visits to his family by insurgents have made it clear that he’s a Taliban target.

He recounted one conversation where the caller noted how he had accompanied soldiers on foot patrols and village meetings.

“We have seen you many times with the infidels . . . We will not forgive you. We will capture you, kill you. There is no mercy for you. You are our target,” he said, recalling the chilling conversation.

His worries are confirmed by Capt. Alexander Duncan, whom he served as an interpreter in 2008.

In a letter of referral, Duncan offers a glowing evaluation and confirms that “Sayed’s work for the Canadian Army directly threatened his life and the lives of his family.

“He continually received threatening cellphone calls from the Taliban, could not visit his family home in Kandahar City and ultimately moved his family to Kabul to escape the increasing death threat,” Duncan said.



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