

ASIA

Gay man recounts escape from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan

Group regained control of country on Aug. 15, 2021

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Imran Khan is a gay man from Afghanistan. A German group evacuated him from the country in March. (Photo courtesy of Imran Khan)

Imran Khan is a gay man from Afghanistan.

An American soldier who texted him on Aug. 26, 2021, 11 days after the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, told him to go to Kabul International Airport. Khan, along with a group of other LGBTQ and intersex Afghans and members of the country's special forces, were able to pass through Taliban checkpoints after a mullah with whom they were traveling said they were going to their cousin's house for a child's funeral. The group of LGBTQ and intersex Afghans were able to enter the airport, but Khan and several soldiers who were members of the country's special forces were outside the perimeter when a suicide bomber killed more than 180 people at a gate the U.S. Marines controlled. They returned after the attack, but were then forced to leave.

Khan was still in Kabul on Aug. 30, 2021, when the last American forces withdrew from the country.

Kabul Luftbrücke, a German group, on March 18, 2022, evacuated Khan from Kabul to Pakistan. Khan arrived in Germany less than a month later and now lives in Korbach, a city in the country's Hesse state.

Khan's partner and many other LGBTQ and intersex Afghans he knows remain in Afghanistan.

"I'm still hoping that an angel will come and will save their lives before the Taliban finds them," Khan told the Washington Blade on Monday.



Imran Khan in Germany. (Photo courtesy of Imran Khan)

Khan is among the LGBTQ and intersex Afghans who have been able to leave Afghanistan since the Taliban regained control of the country.

Dane Bland, the director of development and communications for Rainbow Railroad, on Monday told the Blade the Toronto-based organization has been able to evacuate 247 LGBTQ and intersex Afghans to the U.S., the U.K., Canada and Ireland.

A group of 29 LGBTQ and intersex Afghans who Rainbow Railroad helped evacuate from Afghanistan with the help of the British government and two LGBTQ and intersex rights groups in the country — Stonewall and Micro Rainbow — arrived in the U.K. on Oct. 29, 2021. A second group of LGBTQ and intersex Afghans reached the country a few days later.

Taylor Hirschberg, a researcher at the Columbia Mailman School of Public Health who is also the Hearst Foundation scholar, said he has helped upwards of 70 LGBTQ and intersex Afghans and their families leave the country.

“I know that there are some people who are still fighting to get people out, but now it has come down to a trickle,” Hirschberg told the Blade on Monday.



Two men in Kabul, Afghanistan, in July 2021 (Photo courtesy of Dr. Ahmad Qais)

Munzahim)

A Taliban judge in July 2021 said the group would once again execute gay people if it were to return to power in the country.

A report that OutRight Action International and Human Rights Watch released earlier this year notes a Taliban official said his group “will not respect the rights of LGBT people” in Afghanistan. The report also documents human rights abuses against LGBTQ and intersex Afghans, including an incident in which the Taliban beat a transgender woman and “shaved her eyebrows with a razor” before they “dumped her on the street in men’s clothes and without a cellphone.”

OutRight Action International on Monday told the Blade that it has had “at least one confirmed report of the killing of an LGBTQ activist, police searching for another and several more reports of extrajudicial killing and other forms of persecution that are difficult to confirm given the danger to political witnesses.”

“The U.S. and other governments that profess support for human rights need to do more to ensure the Afghan regime respects fundamental rights of all Afghans and help those in danger to reach safety,” said OutRight Action International.

Bland said Rainbow Railroad “absolutely” feels “governments, including the governments of the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, should be doing more to help LGBTQI+ Afghans fleeing the current crisis.”



Kabul, Afghanistan, in July 2021. (Photo courtesy of Dr. Ahmad Qais Munhazim)

Immigration Equality Legal Director Bridget Crawford on Monday noted her organization's LGBTQ and intersex Afghan clients who "survived unspeakable trauma, both as a consequence of sharia law and existing brutal homophobic practices" are "now safely resettled in Canada." Crawford nevertheless added that Immigration Equality recognizes that "many more queer people are still at grave risk in Afghanistan."

"The Biden administration must prioritize these LGBTQ Afghans as refugees in the United States," said Crawford. "President Biden himself has expressed that the U.S. has the good will and capacity to take in vulnerable refugees, but he must back up those words with action."

State Department spokesperson Ned Price on Monday told reporters during a briefing that nearly 90,000 Afghans have been "evacuated or otherwise transported to the" U.S. since Aug. 15, 2021. Price also noted the U.S. has "facilitated the departure of some"

13,000 Afghans from Afghanistan since the last American troops withdrew from the country.

“There are a number of priorities, a number of enduring commitments we have to the people of Afghanistan,” said Price. “At the top of that list is to use every tool that we have appropriate to see to it that the Taliban lives up to the commitments that it has made publicly, that it has made privately, but most importantly, the commitments that the Taliban has made to its own people, to all of the Afghan people. And when we say all of the Afghan people, we mean all. We mean Afghanistan’s women, its girls, its religious minorities, its ethnic minorities. The Taliban has made these commitments; the Taliban, of course, has not lived up to these commitments.”

Price, who is openly gay, did not specifically refer to LGBTQ and intersex Afghans during Monday’s briefing.

Hirschberg said Canada, France, Germany and the U.K. have “come to bat” and “are really supporting getting LGBTQI Afghans out, along with others.” He told the Blade the U.S. has not done enough.

“We’re not seeing quite the eagerness from the United States, unfortunately,” said Hirschberg.

The Blade has reached out to the White House for comment on the first anniversary of the Taliban regaining control of Afghanistan and efforts to help LGBTQ and intersex Afghans leave the country.

Ukraine overshadows plight of LGBTQ and intersex Afghans

Russia on Feb. 24 invaded Ukraine.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees notes more than 6 million Ukrainians have registered as refugees in Europe.

The European Union allows Ukrainians to travel to member states without a visa.

Germany currently provides those who have registered for residency a “basic income” that helps them pay for housing and other basic needs. Ukrainian refugees can also receive access to German language classes, job training programs and childcare.

Dr. Ahmad Qais Munhazim, an assistant professor of global studies at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia who is originally from Afghanistan, has helped three groups of Afghans leave the country since the Taliban regained control of it.

Munhazim on Monday noted to the Blade his family has lived in a Toronto hotel room for three months. Munhazim also pointed out the treatment that Ukrainian refugees once they reach the EU, the U.K., Canada or the U.S.

“Countries of course would claim they were not prepared, but we can see that it was a very racialized response,” said Munhazim. “The way they responded to Ukraine, they weren’t prepared for that either, but we know that these borders immediately started opening up, assistance was offered in a very, very humanitarian way to Ukrainians just because they had blond hair and blue eyes, which was not offered to Afghans or Syrians earlier when they were fleeing Syria.”



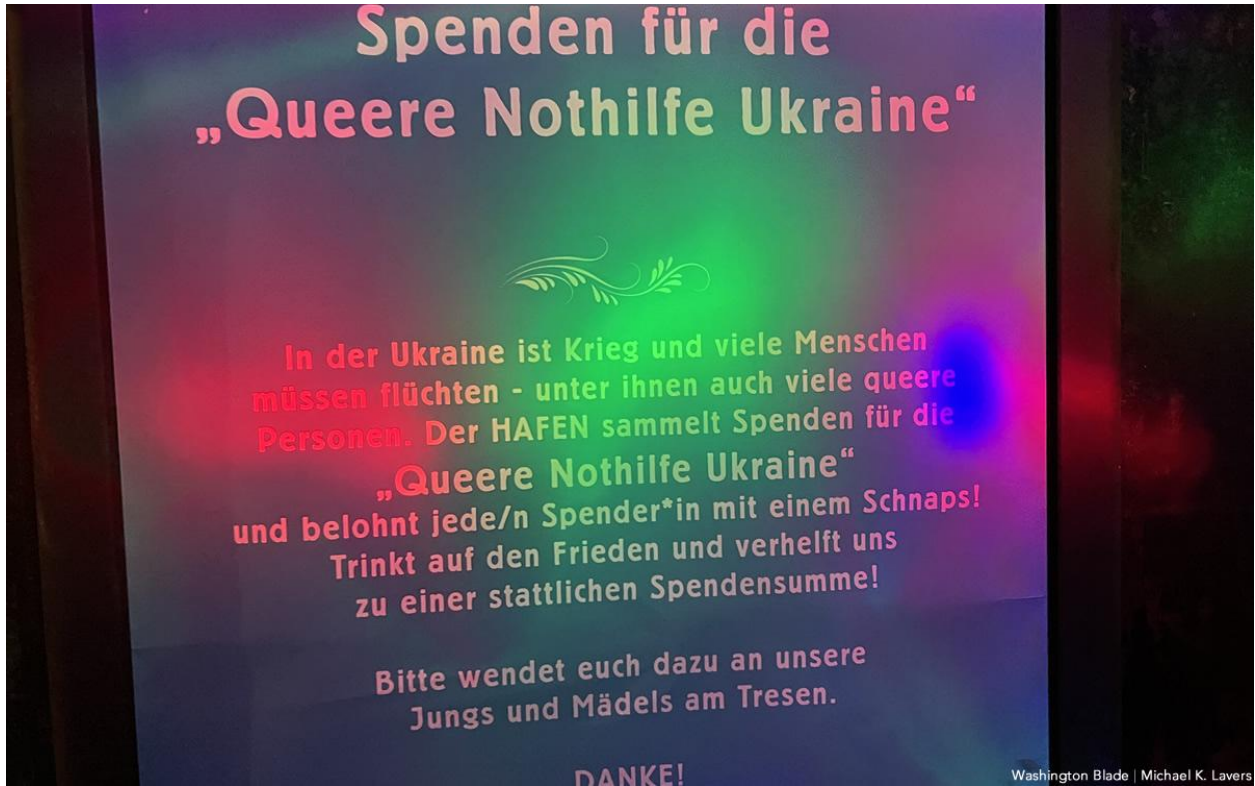
A banner at Keflavík International Airport in Iceland on July 27, 2022, welcomes Ukrainians to the country. (Washington Blade photo by Michael K. Lavers)

Maydaa told the Blade that countries had “this huge concern about LGBT people coming from Afghanistan.”

“It was related to, I believe, terrorism and all this prejudice of Afghan people,” said Maydaa. “I also think this is playing a huge role when it comes to resettlement and international action.”

Maydaa, like Munhazim, also noted the different reception that Ukrainian refugees have received once they reached the EU or the U.K.

“They, especially in Europe and the U.K., feel they have more responsibility towards Ukraine,” said Maydaa. “[There was] all this racism on the news. ‘They look like us. They are blonde, green eyes, white skin, Christians.’”



Hafen, a gay bar in Berlin's Schöneberg neighborhood, shows its solidarity with LGBTQ and intersex Ukrainians on July 23, 2022. (Washington Blade photo by Michael K. Lavers)