



## **Afghan who worked for US denied visa after employer kidnapped**

*The gunmen at his doorstep were the final straw for "Abdul."*



*Wakil Kohsar/AFP via Getty Images, FILE A policeman keeps watch as he stands outside an outpost set up against Taliban fighters at Aziz Abad village in Maiwand district of Kandahar province of Afghanistan, Sept. 27, 2020.*

*After escaping the attack -- whether they intended to kidnap or kill him was unclear -- he, his wife and four children fled [Afghanistan](#) for India, where they were granted temporary asylum.*

*Their hope was pinned on receiving U.S. visas after his years of working for the American government in his home country, a process that had dragged on for years until he was approved in February 2019.*

*Another year of waiting, however, and "Abdul," whose real name ABC News agreed not to use for his own safety, found out in March that his approval was rescinded. The reason, according to his lawyer and U.S. Embassy documents obtained by ABC News, was that officials were unable to recertify Abdul's letters of support from his former American employer, Mark Frerichs.*

*But that's because Frerichs had been kidnapped by forces aligned with the [Taliban](#) two months prior. His one chance to appeal was denied again last week, leaving him stranded in India or expelled into danger in Afghanistan.*

*"I have no way out," Abdul told ABC News in an interview.*

*"Here, I am not able to have a good job, I don't have health insurance, I'm not able to send my children to school even if the lockdown finishes. In Afghanistan, my life is in high risk."*



*AFP via Getty Images, FILE An Afghan security personnel stands guard at the site where a Taliban car bomb detonated at the entrance of a police station in Kabul on Aug. 7, 2019.*

*Abdul's surreal story is one of bureaucratic nightmares that now threaten himself and his young family, left with the impossible choice of residing illegally in India or returning to Afghanistan.*

*Amid negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, the militant group has targeted Afghans who worked for the U.S. presence, along with police officers, students and journalists, in a recent spike in violence.*

*It's also symptomatic of the larger problems with the special visa programs the U.S. government created for Afghans and Iraqis who worked for the U.S. military and diplomatic missions in both countries.*

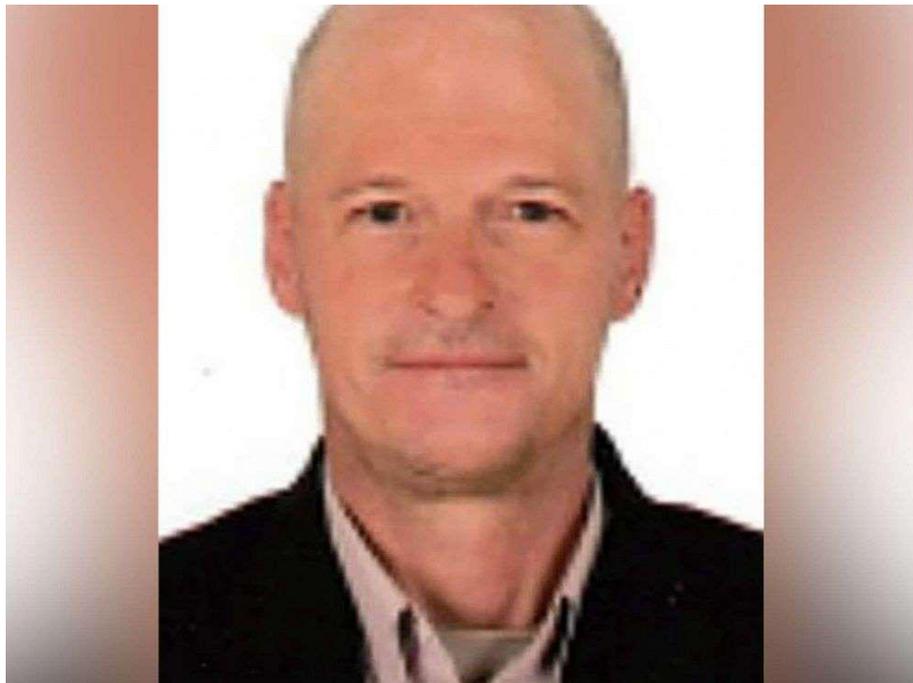
*Critics, including several Republican and Democratic lawmakers, have accused the Trump administration of slow-walking the visas, with just seven Afghans granted visas between April and July while 157 were rejected or had their approval revoked, according to a recent report by the Homeland Security and State departments.*

*The State Department declined to discuss Abdul's case because "visa records are confidential under U.S. law," a spokesperson said. But they cited the temporary suspension of visa services earlier this year because of [COVID-19](#) and defended the department's processes, saying in part, "We are committed to providing efficient and secure SIV processing while maintaining national security as our highest priority." Since 2006, Congress has made available a set number of special immigrant visas, or SIVs, for Afghan and Iraqi translators or for contractors who face an "ongoing serious threat as a consequence of such employment."*

*Abdul, who was born in Wardak province just west of Kabul, worked in construction. He studied engineering at Kabul University and worked for nearly a decade with U.S.*

*firms and on projects for the State Department and U.S. military, including the Air Force and Army Corps of Engineers.*

*During those years, he met and worked with Frerichs, a 58-year old American engineer and U.S. Navy veteran who worked on development projects throughout Afghanistan. They worked together for four years at one firm, "where Mark Frerichs was my supervisor and best colleague and adviser," Abdul said.*



*FBI Mark Randall Frerichs is seen in this undated photo released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.*

*"He is a very kind man, he is very friendly," he added of his "friend" Frerichs, saying that they traveled often together for projects and that he would occasionally provide Frerichs with medicine, food, supplies and warm clothes while the American was holed up in security compounds.*

*Frerichs disappeared in January, believed to be kidnapped by forces aligned with the Taliban, although the group has denied responsibility. The FBI has announced a reward of up to \$1 million for information leading to his release, and senior U.S. officials, including Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#) and special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, have publicly called for his release in recent months, as U.S. troops draw down from the country.*

*Like Frerichs, Abdul's years of work for the U.S. endangered his life. Over the years, other Afghan and American colleagues and friends were attacked, kidnapped or killed, including a blast near his work site in May 2017 that left him with lung problems, and an attack on his firm's senior management in February 2018 that injured several people.*

*By that point, Abdul had already applied for a U.S. visa, submitting an application in December 2016. His hope had been that his work with the U.S. government, which*

*also imperiled his life, would now afford him a lifesaving opportunity -- allowing him and his wife to bring their children to America to raise them here.*

*"During the time I was working with [Abdul] as his co-worker/supervisor, I have found him to be a dedicated and hardworking company member. He displayed exceptional work ethics," Frerichs wrote in his letter of support in July 2017.*

*A copy of his passport was included in Abdul's application, along with other evidence of their work together, and the two exchanged emails as recently as October 2019, with Frerichs promising to "do what I can to assist" the delay in Abdul's visa.*

*SIV applications must first be approved by a team at the U.S. Embassy and then the chief of mission. From there, an applicant applies formally for a visa through U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, is interviewed and can be accepted. The lengthy process, with many layers of required paperwork, can be difficult to navigate, especially for the majority of applicants who don't have a lawyer.*

*But in April 2018, weeks after receiving chief of mission approval, Abdul couldn't wait any longer for the process to unfold. Two gunmen came to his house, seeking to kidnap or kill him, he said: "They wanted to kill me because we were not cooperating with insurgents. ... I no longer felt safe."*

*He and his family escaped into hiding and, shortly afterward, fled to India and into ambiguity -- unauthorized to work, unable to send his children to school and unclear about how long his asylum status would last there.*

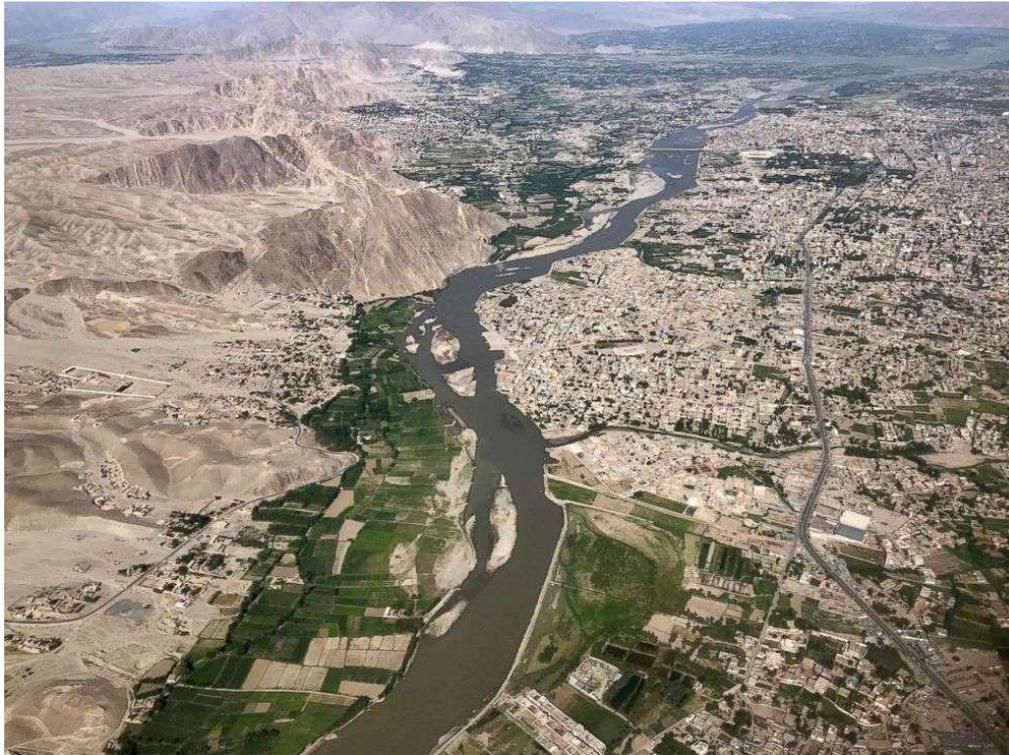
*"I cannot explain it. It's really hard for me to be here in an uncertain situation," he said.*

*Throughout that time, he worked diligently, but with growing frustration, on acquiring a visa. The embassy verified his letter from Frerichs, at times asking him to provide staff in Delhi other documents, like a medical evaluation.*

*In February 2019, he was conditionally approved by USCIS and completed his embassy interview four months later -- then was left again to wait.*

*But last March, he was hit with the sharp shock of rejection, his approval suddenly rescinded. "You did not provide a valid letter of recommendation with your application," the embassy said in a letter.*

*Lawyers from the International Refugee Assistance Project, or IRAP, a legal nonprofit based in New York, said that National Visa Center staff twice told them that Abdul's approval was withdrawn "solely" because the office couldn't re-verify Frerichs' letter.*



*Ian Pannell/ABC News Afghanistan, as seen from above in June 2018, can be breathtaking for visitors.*

*"That was a clear and obvious mistake. ... They never contacted me. They never asked me that there was something missing or any information is required to get rectified or revised," Abdul said.*

*IRAP worked with Abdul to file an appeal to the U.S. Embassy, pointing out the obvious difficulty in re-verifying a letter from someone who's been kidnapped and including two new letters from a second and third American supervisor, one of whom had already supported his application in his 2016 submission.*

*But last Friday, he was informed that it was also rejected -- with the same citation: "You did not submit a valid letter of recommendation."*

*They also rejected the new letters by saying his employment under those supervisors didn't meet "the requirement of at least two years of employment by or on behalf of the U.S. government."*

*SIV applicants only have one opportunity to appeal, seemingly leaving Abdul's application at a dead end. IRAP lawyers are consulting on what other options remain, including starting the process all over again.*

*But for Abdul, his future is not his focus. In text messages, just hours after finding out the news his appeal had been rejected, he told ABC News he was "very disappointed," but wanted to help secure Frerichs' release now.*

*"Just as my brother, his life is very important, more important than anything, no matter how reckless the [chief of mission] is," he said.*

*"I'm still honestly proud for my 10 years of service with the U.S. government and being Mark's close colleague for years and his trusted friend for almost nine years."*

*"Please keep [pushing] awareness about my missing friend, colleague and supervisor Mark Frerichs," he added. "I will be sending prayers as always for his safety and soon release."*