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**RICARDO ARMENDARIZ**

*Interviewed by: Rick Driscoll  
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**INTERVIEW**

*Q: Today is May 7, 2024. This is Rick Driscoll. For our Afghanistan project, I'm interviewing Ricardo Enrique Armendáriz Macías, who is currently working at U.S. Consulate General Guayaquil in Ecuador. Good morning, Ricardo.*

ARMENDARIZ: Good morning, Rick. Thank you for your time.

*Q: We would like, first, to ask you if you would give a little history about yourself, going up to and including your experience when you did temporary duty at U.S. Embassy Kabul, in 2018-2019.*

**First Experience Working at U.S. Embassy Kabul**

ARMENDARIZ: Thank you for this opportunity to share my experiences. I was very blessed to discover new cultures and I found out that although we come from very different countries and backgrounds, at the end of the day, we all have the same dreams. We all want the best for our family. We all want to succeed in life, and you find that in every nationality that I have met all over the world. I've been blessed to travel all around the world and discover the same things, the same dreams from people. We're all one at the end of the day.

When I went to Kabul in 2018, I was inspired by my supervisor who had served in Afghanistan in 2016, and another friend that was there. I was inspired. They shared their experiences, and they said it was very positive. That's why I volunteered to go to Kabul.

*Q: When did you join the consulate and what position did you have before that? A little bit about where you're from.*

ARMENDARIZ: I am from Guayaquil, Ecuador, and I joined the State Department in 2006 with the U.S. Consulate. I've been working in the immigrant visa section since 2006, so I'm a visa assistant. In June, I will reach 18 years working for the Department of State. I've been having so much fun. I've been very blessed.

*Q: Congratulations. That was the position you had in 2018 when you volunteered?*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes, exactly. I had been blessed to do the same work in Kabul and Doha as a visa assistant. Basically, similar work.

*Q: In Kabul in 2018 you worked in the immigrant visa section. Did you handle special immigrant visas—or SIVs—too?*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes, immigrant visas and special immigrant visas.

*Q: You had already worked with special immigrant visas before?*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. In the consulate in Guayaquil. We had that type of visa issuance when co-workers had been working for twenty years for the Department of State. They are eligible for special immigrant visas.

*Q: So, these were Ecuadorian colleagues who applied for the special immigrant visas?*

ARMENDARIZ: Ecuadorians, yes.

*Q: You went to Kabul in 2018. What happened there?*

ARMENDARIZ: Before applying for a TDY [temporary duty] to Kabul in 2018, I was sure in advance that I would be selected. I knew I was going to work on special immigrant visas in Afghanistan. I would be 100 percent focused on that. Everything that my friend told me about Kabul was almost exactly the same as what happened with me. I was very blessed to meet many friends that supported me over there from many nationalities, such as the United States, Mexico, Guyana, India, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Armenia, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

*Q: Can you explain, for people that don't know much about special immigrant visas, what is the process and what did you and your colleagues do in processing one?*

ARMENDARIZ: In Afghanistan, the special immigrant visa applicants have had to work for the U.S. government. Many of them were translators and interpreters, so their English was very good. They applied for their special immigrant visa with their families, with their spouses and their children under 21.

Over in Kabul, we were doing the pre-screening process before the applicants came to the window to talk to the officer. We prepared their cases, entered all their data, and checked on the system about their employment with the U.S. government. We had to put all that information in the IVO [the immigrant visa overseas] system so the consular officer could review that information and have it ready at the time of the interview.

*Q: How long does it take? Let's say an interpreter came in at the start of the year, in January, and submitted his paperwork, how long did all this take when you were there?*

ARMENDARIZ: The SIV process could take one or two years. It depends on the case. After the SIV interview, it may take from days to several months.

*Q: And your work was done at the start of the process or at the end when everything was approved?*

ARMENDARIZ: We were at the end because they were going to the special immigrant visa interviews.

*Q: And after that, if they were approved, they would receive their visas and the passports at the end?*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. They were going to the U.S. Embassy in Kabul and they would get their visa package and passport. I was not at the windows. I was working on the computer with other visa assistants doing the pre-screening process.

*Q: How many people were processed in a day or during a month?*

ARMENDARIZ: I remember that we worked a lot of overtime. I remember there were big families. There were families of 8, 10 or even 12 applicants. In one day, maybe I would do the screening for as many as 60 or 80 people. It depended on the day.

*Q: How many visa assistants like you were there doing this processing?*

ARMENDARIZ: It was a big number. For the assistants, we were five or six plus the locals. Including all the consular officers there were maybe 30 or 40 people, something like that.

*Q: That's large.*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. It was a big number.

*Q: Were there any special complications or issues with their visas? Was there something especially hard with these visas?*

ARMENDARIZ: That part of the process would be seen by the consular officer. I believe that the consular officers would have encountered many different scenarios.

*Q: Do you have an idea how many visas were approved? Do you have a sense of how many the section did?*

ARMENDARIZ: In my six months over there, I'm sure it was in the thousands, but I don't recall the exact number right now.

*Q: Did you feel like there was a special urgency or priority trying to get these things done? What was your sense of that?*

ARMENDARIZ: Of course. I remember my supervisors were all the time telling us how important this work was and that it was a priority for the Department of State. We felt a lot of support from our managers. They also knew we were working long hours, with overtime. And they always said that if we needed some time off, we could take that time off because we had been working so hard. I remember that support from our managers.

*Q: Were you working six days a week there?*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. I worked from Sunday to Saturday. We worked overtime on Saturdays and we had Fridays off.

*Q: Were you living in an apartment or did they put you in one of those containers?*

ARMENDARIZ: I was in a container. I was doing great in that container. I was comfortable.

*Q: How was the security situation in Kabul? Did you feel safe?*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. I remember it was improving at the time. When I left in January 2019, after a couple of months, a good friend of mine—an American friend that was over there working—told me that he had a sense that peace may be coming. It was very positive. It was a different time.

*Q: Did you meet Afghan colleagues and other locally employed staff—or LES—from Afghanistan? What did you think of them?*

ARMENDARIZ: Of course. I'm still in touch with them. They were great. They always wanted to show their culture to me and their food. I was very happy with them. I couldn't believe their difficult situations; they told me that they were experiencing some problems. Yet they always showed up on time, even though there were problems for them because of rain or sometimes they said at night they could experience trouble with the regime over there. They had some homemade bunkers at their homes. So, if there was a problem they would go into their bunkers. My Afghan colleagues were very professional, their English was very good, and they were always at work on time. I felt very supported by them.

*Q: Did any particular stories stand out when you were working with your Afghan colleagues?*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. I have a great friend who is now in the United States. He had a hard time when all the problems happened in 2021, when people were escaping from Afghanistan.

All my friends could get out before it happened [the fall of Kabul to the Taliban], but there was one friend that couldn't leave on time, so he was in Afghanistan for almost all of 2022. He was having a bad time. When I was texting with him, sometimes he said, "Don't text me right now because I'm going through a checkpoint and I could get in big trouble right now, so don't text me." Stuff like that. It was so great that when I was in Doha, I received a call from him. He told me, "Can you imagine that right now my petition was approved and I will go to Pakistan to get my special immigrant visa?" That was a big moment.

*Q: Did this happen in April 2022?*

ARMENDARIZ: Exactly. It happened in April 2022. I was very emotional and thought that this can't be real. I'm here in Doha doing this important work in the Afghan Affairs Unit and now my friend called, and he said he had his petition approved. It was like a dream come true.

*Q: Did you get off the Embassy compound in 2019 or did you spend the whole time on the compound?*

ARMENDARIZ: I spent the whole time on the compound. I would have loved to get out, at least for some minutes, but it wasn't possible.

### **Supporting Afghans from Doha after the Fall of Kabul**

*Q: You came back to Guayaquil in 2019. Then two years or so later, you heard about a new opportunity to work in Doha on Afghanistan cases. How did you hear about it and what did you do?*

ARMENDARIZ: It was all meant to be. As it happened when I was in Kabul, I was sure I was going there. I was 100 percent focused and visualizing the process over in Doha.

Actually, I was in contact with my Afghan friends that were in the camp in Doha. They said, "We're having some difficulties. It's very hot. I'm with my family, with my baby. It's difficult and I wish this process would move faster."

For some friends, the process was fast, like one or two weeks. Others had to wait a little bit more. I was in contact with my friends. They were telling me their experience over there in the camps. I was visualizing in my mind what was happening over there, figuring out with my mind the way to be there to help them. Because the day when all the tragedy happened over there in Afghanistan—

*Q: August 2021.*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. My American supervisor, who left Guayaquil, had been there in Kabul. He was at the airport doing all the hard work. He didn't have too much sleep. He had worked at getting out the American citizens and the Afghan people.

I remember that day I was with Mary Fisk-Ridder, the head of the consular section in Guayaquil, and we were watching the screen. I was telling Mary, "I cannot believe this is happening. I want to be there helping my friends over there." And Mary said, "I'm feeling very bad. I don't know why this happened."

After a few months, a friend of mine from Georgetown, Guyana, who had been with me in Kabul, told me that an American colleague was working in Doha. He sent me information about working in Doha through a WhatsApp message. That's how I found out about it. I talked with my supervisor. I was blessed that they said you can apply to go to Doha. And the same day I sent an email to apply. I received a response, and they said, "Yes, we have a position for you. Could you please come in April." That was in December 2021 or January 2022. In April of 2022, while I was in Doha, I told my friend from Guyana: "Leandre, you will be here in Doha working at the Afghanistan Affairs Unit." As I predicted, my friend, Leandre, did an excellent job in Doha in June of 2023.

*Q: In Doha, where were you working? Were you at the site where all the refugees were or did you work out of the embassy in Doha?*

ARMENDARIZ: We were at the camp. This consular section where we were at was next to where the Afghan people were sleeping. The camp looked to me like a military space with warehouses, and places where you buy stuff, like a PX.

We built a consular section from scratch. We improvised. There was a room and we brought very used furniture from warehouses that were over there. My supervisor said, "Let's go check for furniture that we can use." We were at a big warehouse and said this furniture looks good, so we transported all of that.

*Q: And people were living in tents or in houses? Where were the people living?*

ARMENDARIZ: It was like some type of a hangar. They told me that in some places, where they had families, they could be together in the same room. If there were people that didn't have a family they were put where there were other people, men and women separated.

I was fortunate to be in Doha in April. I could handle it because I'm used to the hot climate in Guayaquil. But my friends told me that from May to October it was extremely hot.

*Q: I assume there were other LES staff from other posts. What roles did you all do? Were you all focused on SIVs or did they do other things to help with the refugees?*

ARMENDARIZ: We were supporting the special immigrant visa operations. There were very few immediate relative immigrant cases. The vast majority—95 percent—were SIV cases. The day I left Doha, I was replaced by a friend from Mexico who had also worked with me in Kabul.

*Q: How big was this operation in Doha? You said there were around forty people in Kabul when you were there in 2018. How many people were on the SIV team at the camp in Doha?*

ARMENDARIZ: In Doha, we had fewer people. We were three assistants and nine consular officers, something like that. After that process in the camp, I went to the U.S. Embassy in Doha to print the SIVs. Sometimes I had to print very important cases at night with my supervisor. Very special cases that had to be expedited. It was a rewarding experience. I was also in charge of giving the applicants their passports with the visas. They were very grateful and their kids were happy. Children would say thank you to me. And I was telling them, thank you for your patience and for understanding that this process could take some time.

*Q: Why would you expedite a case? What made it so special?*

ARMENDARIZ: An Afghan coworker told me, "Please understand that the Afghan people are stressed and they don't feel well over there in the camp." When we printed visas at night I heard that some of the applicants were having some trouble and they wanted to immigrate as soon as possible because there was a problem. This applicant would be having a very stressful situation. I heard some of the stories. Unfortunately, the stories are very sad.

*Q: Do you have an idea of how many people were at the camp while you were there?*

ARMENDARIZ: When I was there, I remember the number was something like 4,000. Many people were leaving, but many people also were entering. Sometimes we would issue a lot of visas in one day, I remember one day we issued 92 SIVs.

*Q: Did the processing go faster in Doha than in Kabul? You mentioned that the processing would take more than a year in Kabul. It seems like it went faster in Doha.*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. It depended on the day. I heard that some applicants were in the camp for months. The wait time for an SIV issuance depended on the circumstances of each case.

*Q: While you were there, did you run across anybody that you had known in Kabul?*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. My first day of work, when I entered the office, the first two people that I saw were two friends from India that had helped me with the computers over in Kabul. We were very happy. We couldn't believe it.

*Q: Did you see any of your Afghan friends in the camp?*

ARMENDARIZ: Unfortunately, I didn't see any Afghan friends. But at the end of the day, I was fortunate to travel just in time when that emergency occurred. As I told you, I

only had one Afghan friend that was left behind, but later he got his SIV with his family in Pakistan. Right now, he's in the United States.

*Q: Were they also processing cases other than SIV cases in the camp? Did you work on that?*

ARMENDARIZ: I heard that there were refugees, but we didn't process many of them.

*Q: That would be a different group that would work on, those were the P1s and the P2s refugees. Your group didn't work on that.*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. The Afghans in that group, I didn't work on that.

*Q: Did you get out to see Doha at all?*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes, of course. I was very blessed to be exploring Doha. It's the safest city in the world, so I was very fortunate to be there during the night and be very safe over there. It is a very beautiful place.

*Q: By the time you left Doha, was the camp smaller? If you were doing ninety cases, approvals a day, hopefully the camp was becoming smaller.*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. Sometimes. Some days we would do sixty cases and on other days just thirty applicants. The numbers were not always the same. When I left, I heard that the number was decreasing. I remember that after a couple of weeks the number of people in the camp became bigger again.

*Q: Do you know what happened to people that did not get approved? You're doing the screening process. The officer is doing his or her screening and I assume that not 100 percent of the applicants got approved.*

ARMENDARIZ: I heard that some of them were not approved because their SAO didn't arrive.

*Q: What's an SAO?*

ARMENDARIZ: Security Advisory Opinion. It didn't arrive or there was some information there. This happened in several cases.

*Q: It was rare? Is that right that most of the people got approved for their SIVs?*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. The majority of the people would be approved and there was a small percentage of people that could not be approved.

*Q: At the end of April 2022, you returned to Guayaquil?*



ARMENDARIZ: Yes.

*Q: Are you still in contact with the friends you made in Kabul and in Doha, but also with the Afghans?*

ARMENDARIZ: Exactly. I'm very happy my Afghan friends have gone to the United States. Some of them work with CARE [Office of the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts]. They're helping the Afghan nationals that live in the U.S.

### **Final Reflections**

*Q: We certainly appreciate all you've done for the U.S. government, both in Ecuador and elsewhere. Do you have any final thoughts about your experience with the Afghans? Are you glad you did it? Any final thoughts?*

ARMENDARIZ: Yes. I'm very blessed that the Department of State has provided me with the best coworkers, best managers, best training, and they believed in my work and my abilities, and I am grateful for that. I am sure that I came here with a mission to change the world and many of our friends also have that dream.

I want to tell you about one of my ancestors. I'm very proud of him. His name is Manuel Cajías. He was one of the heroes of the independence of my country. He was murdered on August 2, 1810. In front of the President's house in Quito, there is a plaque with his name and other heroes that fought that day, but they were in prison and murdered that day. There is also a wax museum in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, that portrays this and many episodes of Ecuadorian history. They were martyrs because they wanted to liberate my country. What I know for sure, in fact, Manuel Cajías is a relative of my mother.

My mother is Carmen Mirella Macías Cajías. Her last name is Cajías. I'm sure that Manuel Cajías is looking through my eyes at what I'm doing. I'm sure his dream was to travel all around the world and see a free world. And through my eyes he is looking.

*Q: He would be very proud.*

ARMENDARIZ: I'm sure he's very proud and I'm sure that through my eyes he is looking all over the work that we're doing, all the efforts and trying to see a free world.

*Q. Thank you.*

*End of Interview*