

Pathway

From A1

evacuated from Afghanistan, the Department of Homeland Security granted Temporary Protective Status (TPS) for two years to vulnerable Afghans and allies who worked alongside the U.S. in Afghanistan. The designation has been extended to May 2025. To remain in the U.S. after TPS expires, Afghan evacuees would need their asylum applications approved, but the U.S. government has an unprecedented backlog of applications.

A glimmer of hope is for Congress to pass the Afghan Adjustment Act, a bipartisan bill that would provide a clear path to citizenship and expand eligibility for Special Immigration Visas for thoroughly vetted Afghan military veterans and those who served with the United States military. The bill, however, has been stuck in House and Senate committees for over a year.

“We have a problem with asylum,” Ahmadi said. “We do not understand if we are staying here, or we are going to back in Afghanistan. It is too dangerous.”

Ahmadi, 29, and her teenage sister were granted asylum, but are disheartened to know that less than half of the former FTP members now residing in the U.S. have been approved.

Ahmadi is among 75 former members of the FTP, 45 of whom found their way to the United States. The remaining women are hiding in various countries overseas.

Expect delays

Resettlement agencies reported that the Afghan Placement and Assistance Program, initiated by the Biden administration to handle the influx of refugees, involved some of the most significant challenges those agencies have ever faced, according to a review by the State Department's Office of Inspector General released in March. Those challenges include the large numbers of Afghan arrivals, delays in processing applications due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the decrease in refugee admissions under the Trump administration, which caused the agencies to lose resources.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) website posted an alert informing candidates for asylum to expect delays due to an extraordinary number of applications for Afghan asylum seekers since the fall of Kabul.

“It will take time for us to work through the unprecedented number of parole requests we have received since Fall 2021,” the alert reads.

When the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan after its 20-year war that followed the 9/11 attacks, Ahmadi and her sister fled their country along with approximately 80,000 other Afghan allies to the U.S. An estimated 76,500 Afghan evacuees were welcomed to the U.S. through Operation Allies Welcome, a Biden directive that instructed the Department of Homeland Security to coordinate federal efforts to help vulnerable Afghan evacuees.

Virginia has the second largest population of Afghan refugees in the country, at just over 18,000, behind California's Afghan population of 51,606, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said the new arrivals of Afghan allies deserve a path to citizenship.

“Virginia is home to one of the largest Afghan diaspora populations in the United States, and I'm proud of many Virginians' work to help resettle Afghan allies following the U.S. withdrawal,” Kaine said in an emailed statement to The Roanoke Times. “I strongly support the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would provide a path to permanent status for many Afghan evacuees.”

The bill has not been voted on and it is unclear that it would have enough votes to overcome any possible filibuster in the Senate.

“Frankly, the challenge has been to find at least 10 Republican senators who will help Democrats overcome a Senate filibuster to pass this bill,” Kaine said.



HEATHER ROUSSEAU PHOTOS, THE ROANOKE TIMES

U.S. Army veteran Rebekah Edmondson, center foreground, navigates through Washington, D.C., with Afghan veterans, behind, to meet with congressional aides and advocate for the Afghan Adjustment Act on Oct. 3. Azizgul Ahmadi, of Blacksburg, right, is a former member of the Female Tactical Platoon (FTP). Edmondson has made it her mission to help members of the FTP, whom she helped train in Afghanistan, integrate into the U.S.

“In the meantime, I'm thankful that these Afghan evacuees will be able to remain in the U.S. legally, and that those who were paroled into the U.S. as part of Operation Allies Welcome can request re-parole without any filing fees or apply for Temporary Protected Status.”

Meanwhile, Ahmadi worries about her fellow veterans and two brothers who, like her, served in the war against the Taliban with the U.S. military and who are hiding overseas as they wait for their asylum applications to be approved in the United States.

“Afghanistan is very dangerous,” Ahmadi said. “Everybody maybe has worked with American people. For 20 years we all fought the Taliban and we work with American people.”

New goals in Blacksburg

In Afghanistan, Ahmadi hoped to become a judge. She was a police officer before joining the Female Tactical Platoon. Women in Afghanistan had many more opportunities before the Taliban returned to power.

“I thought I be big woman in Afghanistan,” Ahmadi said.

When Ahmadi arrived in Blacksburg two years ago, she could not speak English. Now, her English skills have vastly improved, she got her driver's license and purchased a white 2018 Mitsubishi Outlander. She and her fellow members of the FTP living in Blacksburg have participated in community events that include Blacksburg Welcoming Week and the annual downtown Christmas parade. In September, Ahmadi and fellow FTP members spoke to a room of over 80 people at Virginia Tech's Torgersen Hall to share their stories as part of a series sponsored by the university's Center for Refugee, Migrant, and Displacement Studies.

Before being granted asylum, Ahmadi was scared that the hard work she was doing to gain traction in a new country would be worthless if she was sent back to Afghanistan. She worries for her fellow Afghan veterans who, like her, came to the U.S. under TPS and are waiting to hear back about their asylum applications.

Now that Ahmadi has been granted asylum, she would like to go to college for nursing and join the U.S. military someday. She said starting over from nothing has been challenging.

“I did not know my ABCs,” she told The Roanoke Times in April.

Since then, Ahmadi has advanced to classes at the Language and Culture Institute (LCI) at Virginia Tech, a program that is part of the university's outreach to international students. To do well in a nursing program in college, she needs to better understand the English language. She took English lessons from volunteer tutors with Blacksburg Refugee Partnership (BRP), which along with The Secular Society provides support for seven Afghan military women and their families who relocated to Blacksburg. Another BRP partner, Literacy NRV, a



Azizgul Ahmadi, 29, is pictured in her apartment on Sept. 30. Ahmadi fled Afghanistan in August 2021 with her younger sister, when the capital of Kabul was overrun by the Taliban following the withdrawal of United States military forces. Ahmadi was a member of the elite Female Tactical Platoon, working with the U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan. Now in Blacksburg her priorities are to take care of her younger sister and to advocate for the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would help secure a pathway to citizenship for Afghan veterans who served with United States military forces.

nonprofit that serves the New River Valley, also helps with English learning. (The Secular Society is a Blacksburg-based nonprofit that has assisted other refugees and has funded a fellowship that has supported this reporting.)

Between work and taking classes, Ahmadi also takes care of her younger sister, Shah Pari Ahmadi, a 17-year-old 11th-grader at Blacksburg High School. The teenager, who is known as Angel by classmates, also has a full schedule. Pari means Angel in Dari, which she prefers to go by in school because teachers and classmates were calling her Shah, which means royalty.

On evenings and weekends, Ahmadi drives her sister to soccer practice and games, boxing class and to her job in the clothing department at Walmart in Christiansburg.

“Right now I have a lot of problems,” Ahmadi said. “Suddenly, everything is done with my country, and we come here. I couldn't believe this for my life. I am hard working and I have a lot of goals for the future, but right now I am not thinking about my future, I am thinking about my sister. She is young. Everything is not good, but I be strong and I help her. I help my family.”

Classic rock blared on the radio at Blacksburg Boxing and Fitness, where Ahmadi watched from beside a set of punching bags outside the sparring area. Shah Pari swayed and danced to the beat. Then it was her turn to spar. The boxers practiced blocking techniques and aimed toward the face. Shah Pari squared a firm stare on her opponent, peeked from behind her pink boxing gloves, and struck. The opponent answered with a blow back to Shah Pari, whose fierce demeanor dissipated into a full faced smile and uncontained giggling, a response she often had during her practice. Sweating, with mascara smeared below her eyes, she ran over to Ahmadi.

“Is my makeup running?” Shah Pari asked her big sister, in English. Ahmadi laughed and wiped the mascara away and Shah Pari ran back to sparring.

Shah Pari has admired her sister and has wanted to follow in her footsteps since they lived in Afghanistan. She said

Ahmadi is more like a mother than a sister.

Shah Pari wanted to go to a boxing club since seeing the sport on television when she was in Afghanistan. The country made progress for women's rights during 20 years of U.S. occupation, including in sports and the armed forces. Her older sister pushed gender boundaries by carrying a gun and working closely with the U.S. military. Still, Ahmadi was protective of her younger sister. She deterred her from practicing boxing in Afghanistan.

“You cannot go to boxing club because here is dangerous,” Ahmadi told her sister when they lived in Afghanistan. “Maybe you find some problem with somebody.”

In the United States, Ahmadi wants to support her younger sister's interests.

Shah Pari said she likes boxing because it makes her feel strong.

Advocating in D.C.

In October, Ahmadi took a break from slinging subs and carting her younger sister around Blacksburg for a trip to Washington, D.C., to advocate for the Afghan Adjustment Act. The team of former FTP comrades and U.S. military members walked through the long hallways furnished with American and state flags outside the doors of congressional offices in the Longworth House Office Building, one of a handful of office buildings in the Capitol used by representatives.

Wearing hot pink dress pants and bright red lipstick, Ahmadi held a blue squishy stress ball, normally passed around in her English class, which signified someone's turn to talk. She stood before congressional aides squeezing the small blue ball, which emboldened her as she addressed her concerns.

“I am one of the FTP members,” she told a Senate aide while standing outside a senator's office. “Right now, I am here but we have a lot of problems, like asylum and green card. We have family in Afghanistan. It is not safe.”

The endeavor was arranged by members of With Honor Action, a D.C.-based nonprofit that promotes bipartisan leadership from military veterans. Also among the group

that went to Capitol Hill were members of the Cultural Support Team (CST), a unit of U.S. military women who trained Afghan women to serve in the FTP. The veterans met with roughly a dozen congressional aides.

Tom Seaman, a Marine Corps veteran and legislative director of With Honor Action, helped arrange the visit. Seaman wanted legislators to hear directly from Afghan veterans in order to build more support for the Afghan Adjustment Act.

He said there are national security implications if the bill is not passed.

“What makes the United States so strong, it's not just our military, it's our system of alliances around the world,” Seaman said. “Those alliances are only as good as our credibility and the trust that we have. Not taking care of our allies, especially ones that stayed beside us for 20 years, in our nation's longest war, is really detrimental to that.”

Seaman said a big reason why the bill has not passed is not because of lack of support, but because of the dysfunction of Congress.

“Legislation in any Congress, but especially this Congress, is especially challenging,” Seaman said. “There's a lot of competing priorities. So this is really a case of the continued dysfunction of the United States Congress really hampering this legislation and other pieces of legislation as well.”

U.S. Army veteran Rebekah Edmondson was a CST member and she worked with Ahmadi in Kabul, and made it her mission to help members of the FTP be able to integrate into the U.S. and receive government benefits.

“They are deserving of the same support that I get,” Edmondson said.

She said supporting the Afghan Adjustment Act is the duty of veterans like her, so that their mission in Afghanistan was not in vain.

“It's also important, as a measure of honoring those that risked their lives and those who lost their lives at war in Afghanistan,” Edmondson said.

Members of the delegation were honored guests during a Veterans of Foreign Wars conference in Washington, D.C., which was in partnership with the American Legion, where veterans showed support for the women military fighters. Edmondson and Seaman both spoke at the conference, along with main speaker Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn.

Klobuchar introduced the bipartisan Afghan Adjustment Act with Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C.

She noted that the bill helps make a path to permanent residency for the Afghan people who worked with the U.S. military, and that many Afghan allies who evacuated are still overseas waiting to hear their fates.

“Nearly 80,000 Afghans who sought refuge in our country are currently in limbo,” Klobuchar said during the conference. “Like the [FTP members] here today, who risked their lives, and their families' safety to protect our service members.”

Klobuchar compared the Afghan Adjustment Act to the Indochina Refugee Program initiated by the Ford administration at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, when more than 140,000 refugees were processed after the collapse of the South Vietnam and Cambodia governments.

“My state actually has the second biggest population [of Southeast Asia refugees] next to California, among refugees,” Klobuchar said, “and they are now and many generations later, are serving as police officers, they are in the state legislature, they are doctors. I mean, it's been an incredible, incredible journey that they have been on in our state.”

More still waiting

An estimated 840,000 Afghans who helped with the U.S. war effort have applied for Special Immigration Visas and remain in Afghanistan, according to an August 2023 report by the State Department's inspector general. SIVs grant permanent residence for people who