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# THE ROANOKE TIMES

Sunday, April 2, 2023

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HEATHER ROUSSEAU, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Former members of the Afghan Female Tactical Platoon from left, Soraiya Nazari, 32, holding her daughter, Victoria Elham, 1, Azizgul Ahmadi, 28, Sima Gul, 26, with her son, Amir Mazlom Yar, 2, and, Suhailia Suhail, 29, are making new homes for themselves in Blacksburg, after the Taliban regained control of their country in 2021. The women are pictured outside their apartment complex on Jan. 10.

## Storms kill at least 21 in US

Tornadoes leveled neighborhoods in at least eight states Friday into Saturday

ADRIAN SAINZ AND ANDREW DEMILLO  
 Associated Press

WYNNE, Ark. — Storms that dropped possibly dozens of tornadoes killed at least 21 people across the South and Midwest, tearing a path through the Arkansas capital, collapsing the roof of a packed concert venue in Illinois, and stunning people throughout the region Saturday with the damage's scope.

Confirmed or suspected tornadoes in at least eight states destroyed homes and businesses, splintered trees, and lay waste to neighborhoods across a broad swath of the country. The dead included seven in one Tennessee county, four in the small town of Wynne, Arkansas, four in Illinois, and three in nearby Sullivan, Indiana.

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## Seeking a better life

Resettled female Afghan veterans work toward a fresh start in Blacksburg

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BLACKSBURG — Sima Gul hiked the steep terrain of the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan, gripping an M4 carbine. Her platoon moved silently and swiftly across the barren landscape, cloaked by the dark of night and navigating the mountainous terrain through the green glow of night vision goggles.

Even in the below-freezing temperature, Gul felt sweat trickle inside her body armor. Hours passed as she trudged alongside the U.S. military tracking down the Taliban in her homeland. It was but one episode in Gul's six years as a member of the Afghan Female Tactical Platoon, a partner to U.S. Special Operations forces that served as a covert unit on combat missions against the Taliban.

Two years later, in the middle of the night in a Blacksburg apartment on the other side of the world, Gul clutched a smart-



U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. DOUGLAS ELLIS

Sima Gul, right foreground, during marksmanship training with the Female Tactical Platoon in Afghanistan in 2016.

phone instead of a rifle, staying awake late at night talking on the phone to family that remains in Afghanistan. She worries about their safety and about her mother, who lost the use of her legs in an explosion at an airport after the Taliban regained control of the country in August 2021.

"They don't know any minute if they are going to be alive or the Taliban is going to attack their house and grab everything and kill them or not," Gul said of her family, speaking in her native Dari language through a translator.

Memories of loved ones who died in war haunt her as she tries to make a new life for herself and her 2-year-old son, Amir. Gul settled in Blacksburg alongside other Afghan women soldiers who fought alongside Americans, but whose fates in the United States are unclear.

Gul, 26, said she dreamed of studying art and becoming an actress before she decided to join the Afghan military.

"This is breaking all the taboos," Gul said about women's military service in her country. "It doesn't matter how they

think; it was my goal to join and I did it."

Female Tactical Platoon members were an advantage for the U.S. Special Forces against the Taliban because of their gender. Female platoon members escorted women and children to safety where they were searched and questioned.

"Men cannot search the body of a woman in Afghan culture," Gul said. "We could communicate with Taliban's women to get more information, asking a lot of questions and also searching them to see if there are any weapons or explosive devices." Gul served in the thick of combat.

"The only mission that I will never forget was the time that there was an explosion, I was so scared and freaked out," Gul said of the blast that killed five male Afghan soldiers. "All of their body parts were shattered. They had missing limbs."

Gul met her husband while

Please see **AFGHAN**, Page A4

**WATCH:** For a video feature about the resettled Afghan veterans, point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**

## Carilion's Bridge evolves from experiment to model program

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In 2018, Carilion Clinic became the first hospital in Virginia to offer the Emergency Department Bridge to Treatment program, creating a direct path for opioid users from short-term withdrawal treatment in an emergency room to long-term treatment within a matter of days.

Outcomes hinged on whether

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**VIEW:** To see a video about Carilion's Bridge, an opioid disorder recovery program, point your smartphone at the QR code and tap the link. **NEWSVU**

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