



HEATHER ROUSSEAU PHOTOS, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Azizgul Ahmadi, center left, with her sister, Shah Pari, celebrates Pari's 17th birthday party in their Blacksburg apartment on Feb. 19. Ahmadi hosted volunteers from Blacksburg Refugee Partnership and fellow Afghan refugees for the party. "I am happy to live here with my neighbors all FTP too," Ahmadi said about the women she served with on the Female Tactical Platoon in Afghanistan.



Anne Abbott, left, board member with Blacksburg Refugee Partnership, works with Sima Gul on Feb. 9, during an English class offered four days a week for Afghan refugees. "I want to learn English so I can stand on my own two feet," Gul said.

Afghan

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serving with the Afghan military. He died in a separate explosion in 2020, during a raid on the Taliban. He had recently returned to active duty following the couple's honeymoon. Gul had told him that she was pregnant, shortly before he died in the explosion.

"Amir is the only precious thing I have from my husband," she said, tears running down her cheeks.

More than 40 FTP fighters were relocated to the United States after the Taliban takeover, with the highest number of former FTP members in Blacksburg, said Rebekah Edmondson, program manager of the Afghan Rescue and Resettlement Program sponsored by the PenFed Foundation, which provides support and assistance to former members of the Female Tactical Platoon.

Seeking asylum

Gul and her colleagues are among more than 70,000 Afghans who were evacuated from their homeland and came to the U.S. on humanitarian parole after the U.S. military left Afghanistan. The parole was authorized for two years under President Joe Biden and will expire in August.

Gul and other FTP members are waiting to hear back about their asylum applications. Another glimmer of hope is for Congress to pass the Afghan Adjustment Act, which could give them permanent status in the United States. So far, however, Congress has not passed the bill, which has been in House and Senate committees since last year. Gul worries that she and other FTP fighters could be returned to Afghanistan if Congress does not act.

Edmondson worked with Gul in Kabul as part of the U.S. Army's Cultural Support Team that trained the Female Tactical Platoon.

"Sima always brought positivity

to an otherwise really challenging environment," Edmondson said. "There was a lot of very difficult challenges and barriers to overcome, and irrespective of that, she'd show up with a smile on her face and she also brought this certain kind of flair."

Edmondson said she is concerned about members of the Female Tactical Platoon who are still in Afghanistan, who could be in danger of Taliban reprisals against them or their families. She explains that not only military equipment was left behind, but also computer data systems have been compromised that could identify Afghans who worked with the U.S. government.

More than 8,000 Special Immigrant Visas were granted to Afghans who aided the U.S. government, according to the Department of State and Department of Homeland Security. SIVs grant people who aided the U.S. government permanent residence.

The Afghan Adjustment Act, which has received bipartisan support in Congress, would expand eligibility for SIVs to certain Afghan nationals and provides a pathway to permanent residence for at-risk Afghan allies and relatives, after additional vetting. The act was stripped from an omnibus spending bill in December, dousing hopes of thousands of refugees and angering supporters.

The bill has languished in both the House and Senate judiciary committees since last year. It is unclear if Congress will get a chance to vote on the bill.

U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., who is not on the Senate Judiciary Committee, said he supports the Afghan Adjustment Act.

"Our Afghan allies were critical to supporting U.S. personnel," Kaine said in an email. "I was proud that Virginia played such a vital role during the 2021 evacuation mission, but we must continue to do more to help them and their families, including by passing the



Sima Gul, center, holds her son, Amir Mazlom Yar, as Azizgul Ahmadi, right, reaches for him during a gathering at her home, welcoming Gul to Blacksburg on Dec. 9. The two served together on the Afghan Female Tactical Platoon along with Soraiya Nazari, left, holding her daughter, Victoria Elham.



Sima Gul walks to the grocery store from her Blacksburg apartment with her son, Amir Mazlom Yar, in his stroller on Jan. 18.

Afghan Adjustment Act."

Chances to learn

The Blacksburg Refugee Partnership and The Secular Society helped bring together the Afghan military women, all of whom served together there. They are making new homes for themselves in an apartment complex wedged against the woods in the college town. [The Secular Society is a Blacksburg-based nonprofit that has assisted other refugees and has funded a fellowship that has supported this reporting.]

Gul arrived at the Roanoke-Blacksburg Regional Airport on a rainy December evening, greeted by a terminal filled with smiling faces. Friends from the

Afghan military, volunteers with Blacksburg Refugee Partnership and mentors from the Cultural Support Team, including Edmondson, welcomed Gul and Amir to their new home in Blacksburg with a bouquet of balloons, some which read, "It's your day!"

Gul pushed her sleeping son in his stroller. Fellow Female Tactical Platoon member Azizgul Ahmadi was one of the first to embrace her.

Gul and Ahmadi served together in Afghanistan and have been living in Blacksburg along with fellow Female Tactical Platoon members and family members, all of whom fled their home country after the Taliban takeover. One woman came to Blacksburg with her husband and their daughter. Ahmadi

came with her teenage sister.

Gul initially relocated to Salt Lake City, Utah, with the aid of U.S. immigration officials, before moving to Blacksburg with help from PenFed Foundation, Blacksburg Refugee Partnership and Sisters of Service. The latter group is comprised of American women veterans who served in Afghanistan with the Cultural Support Teams that trained FTP fighters, and who now work to resettle Afghan women who fought with them. Gul's mentor through Sisters of Service, Becca Moss, greeted her in Roanoke at the airport.

Gul said she moved to Blacksburg to be with her peers from the

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