



A FRESH START IN EXILE

WAHIDA IS ONE OF MANY WOMEN WHOSE LIVES
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TALIBAN TOOK CONTROL LAST SUMMER

BY KAWTHER A. RAMADAN



Wahida wonders if she can begin again. In a two-bed small room in Crown Plaza Hotel in Mississauga, Wahida Ghazizada sits on a peanut-coloured leather desk chair, wearing a rose gold headscarf. Her new baby, Ali, is cooing in the background playing with her husband, Ahmed. Wahida tries to hide the hurt she still endures behind a welcoming smile, while she charts her journey from Afghanistan to Canada.

That journey began in mid-October when she departed Kabul for Doha, Qatar. Then, it was onto Tirana, the capital of Albania. She waited in that small, remote Balkan country for her immigration papers to Canada to be completed.

Wahida had other, pressing matters on her mind. She was in the last month of her first pregnancy. So, doctors recommended that they stay in Albania until she delivered her baby boy.

"Arriving from Kabul to Toronto took two months," she says. "It was a hard time in Albania. No one in my family was with me. There were language barriers because the medical staff did not speak English. I suffered during my Caesarean birth."

Wahida is not, of course, the only Afghan woman to have faced hardships and struggles. She is one of many women whose lives have been turned inside out since the Taliban took control last summer. Schools, workplaces, public services, and even the streets no longer welcome women.

In Kabul, Wahida worked for the Women and Peace

Studies Organization, an NGO that focuses on sustainable peace and the democratic participation of Afghan women.

"The Taliban have threatened women NGO workers if they do not wear the all-covering burqa," she says. "We were worried about going to work. Part of my role as a senior finance officer in WPSO is to go to the bank and deal with international donors, and this is something the Taliban doesn't like, so I worried about my life and decided to leave my family, career, dream and seeking asylum to Canada."

The Taliban has banned women and girls from attending high school and university. Wahida's 15-year-old sister, who remains in Kabul, suffers from depression because there is nothing to do except eat and sleep.

Wahida is exhausted. She wants to protect her sister and find a way to reunite here in Canada.

"When I came here last December, I asked my counsellor how I can help my family come to Canada. They said that there is no way. You have to get a job first, and this is my next step," Wahida says.

Wahida and her husband, Ahmed Mokhtar, want a fresh start to improve life for their son, Ali. They also want to help other family members who are at risk and have few opportunities.

Ahmed has short-cut dark hair and brown eyes. Today, he's wearing a red and black shirt and navy jeans. He looks out the window to hide his tears.

"We left our families seeking a good life for our son," Ahmed says. "We will do our best to do so."

He also left behind a job.

"I was working in the cosmetic industry. After the Taliban rule, my business decreased because the Taliban banned women from going to work and university. It affected their purchasing power to buy my products," Ahmed says. Ahmed says it has been hard to work in the same business in Canada because he can't find the money to start again.

"Instead, I am now preparing to be engaged in the market in Canada by improving my language and getting training in the construction field," he says.

Last March, Ottawa announced that it was "working hard to re-settle at least 40,000 Afghan nationals as quickly and safely as possible. To date, a total of 10,025 Afghan nationals have arrived in Canada."

Others are helping, too.

The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), based in Washington, helped Wahida and several Afghan women rights defenders to come to Canada by providing protection and resettlement for civil society activists, journalists, artists, academics, judges, prosecutors, and security officers.

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ICAN has re-settled more than 1,500 people.

"The majority of these 472 families are those affiliated with longstanding ICAN partner organizations," says Melinda Holmes, Program Director for WASL at ICAN. "As of the end of January, 75 percent of the people on our list remained in Afghanistan. Fifteen percent got out to third countries, including Albania, Pakistan, UAE, Iran, Mexico, Qatar, Greece, Turkey, Tajikistan, and Chile and 10 percent – or about 50 families -- had reached countries where they are being re-settled for the long term, including the USA, Germany, Canada, Sweden, France, UK, and Spain."

Still, the Canadian government is facing unprecedented logistical challenges getting people out of Afghanistan, according to Immigration Minister Sean Fraser.

"We helped facilitate some of these evacuations, but not all. Many of our partners had conducted peacebuilding and peace process work supported by the Government of Canada and other countries through ICAN's Innovative Peace Fund, which now puts them at great risk," she says. "This makes many of them eligible for Canada's Special Immigration Measures program for those who assisted the Government of Canada. And while Global Affairs Canada has referred most of them to IRCC, we have seen painfully little movement since September. Wahida's case is one of the few rays of light."

