

Media Release: Thursday, November 25, 2021

For Immediate Release

Plea to Canada's Prime Minister to Aid Women Athletes of Afghanistan Escape Death:

"Honour the Promise" (#HonourThePromise)

On Thursday, November 25, 2021 Friba Rezayee, the first woman from Afghanistan to compete at the Olympics in 2004, joined by Canada's Olympic gold medal women's soccer team, asked Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to honour this country's promise to the world to prioritize Afghan refugees in the highest risk category. Women athletes, who have received death letters and warnings of the death penalty simply for playing sport are, without question, in that category. Former captain of Afghanistan's women's team, Khalida Popal, now in Denmark, also signed onto Rezayee's letter. Popal recently worked with Kim Kardashian, and Rabbi Moshe Margaretten of New York to safely evacuate 30 young female soccer players and their families (130 in total). Leeds United FC successfully lobbied the UK government to provide visas.

In her letter to Prime Minister Trudeau, Ms. Rezayee wrote, "The situation in Afghanistan as it relates to women's sports and rights is dire. Several members of our teams have been threatened with judgement in a sharia law court operated by the Taliban, with punishments as high as 100 lashings publicly." Rezayee says most female athletes "have been left behind" and are in hiding, "terrified of the deadly consequences of being found", while many male officials and athletes from sport were evacuated. It's a cruel example of how misogyny works to benefit men.

The IRCC (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada) knows this but has not acted, instead, in October, the IRCC unintentionally breached the private information, including contact information, of 636 Afghan who applied for refugee status. Since then, countless refugees in hiding have received fraudulent calls from people saying they need their location in order to help them. Should any of the contact information of women athletes fall into the hands of the Taliban, and they are found, they will be executed.

Meanwhile, at least one female soccer player, who is in hiding in a third country and applied to the IRCC in August, was contacted by someone who questioned her, saying he represented the Canadian government. He had the information she had previously provided the IRCC. She gave him her location and later realized had to flee to another safe house.

On November 2, Rezayee, Popal and two Canadian retired athletes wrote to the new Minister of Immigration, the Honourable Sean Fraser, showing that even though Canada has pledged to bring 40,000 Afghan refugees to Canada, and prioritize women, the number of female athletes its allowed in so far is abysmal:

While Canada and your predecessor promised to prioritize highly vulnerable women—and specifically female athletes—in fact, very few women athletes from Afghanistan have been allowed into Canada, despite signatories to this letter having tried since August to clear IRCC barriers to get them safely here. Yet we count only 8 soccer players and 2 female soccer coaches, 3 runners, 1 snowboarder and 1 cricketer. If there are more, and we hope there are, we do not

know about them. Here is our best estimate of comparative numbers as shared among the advocates with whom we liaise:

CANADA: 15 in total

PORTUGAL: 22 female soccer players

SWITZERLAND: 30 female cyclists

U.K: 35 female soccer players

AUSTRALIA: 45 female soccer players, 4 female soccer coaches, 2 female soccer referees, 8 taekwondo athletes and 2 para-athletes, 1 karate athlete

So far Minister Fraser has not responded to their initial letter. (Both letters attached)

Rezayee, Popal and their national and international supporters ask Canada immediately work with organizations evacuating Afghan refugees who are at the highest risk, ensure Canadian visas for them and provide transportation to Canada as soon as is humanly possible. Women sport advocates will provide a confidential and verified list of female athletes known to them to the Minister of Immigration and the Prime Minister.

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