

Afghan families embrace a new home that is ‘full of joy’

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Asia



Farid Rahmani, with his family in a hotel outside London, was shot four times as he was leaving the British embassy in Kabul, where he had worked for 17 years

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As soon as he emerges from quarantine Waheed Sabawoon wants “to go to the park with his young children and inhale deeply. I want to breathe in the air”.

The interpreter, his wife, Mashita, 29, and their children, Naveed, five, and Muska, two, have been staying in a hotel near Heathrow since they escaped from Kabul. On Monday they will be free to begin a new, uncertain life in the UK.

“From the window I can see buses, traffic, trees. The sky is quite calm and serene. What’s next? I don’t know. The UK is so full of brilliance and joy,” said Sabawoon, 30. “We can find any place entertaining and romantic.”

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He hopes to see the spires of Oxford University and perhaps find a job as a teacher or in management. One day, he said, he wanted to take his family on the London Eye.

But first he must decompress after the scramble for survival at Kabul airport. “It’s really hard, to be honest — the memories of abandoned colleagues. It was horrible, horrible. I am physically safe, but mentally, in my mind, I am still traumatised. It was a nightmare for us.”

The government has promised to take in up to 20,000 Afghans in the coming years, as part of Operation Warm Welcome, providing £5 million in housing support for councils. About 5,000 people are expected to be resettled by the end of this year.

Thousands [more refugees are expected](#) to arrive in the coming months after undertaking treacherous overland journeys out of Afghanistan. Many of them are likely to be unaccompanied children who will be in need of care as their asylum

claims are processed, according to the UK's largest fostering charity, the Adolescent and Children's Trust (Tact).

AFGHANISTAN

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Interpreters such as Sabawoon and Farid Rahmani, who spent 17 years working at the British embassy, will finally be offered the chance to settle here permanently. Rahmani was initially denied sanctuary in the UK, despite having been shot four times as he left the embassy in July. He managed to get his wife and six children, aged two to 14, on one of the last flights out. They had been trying for days to get to the tarmac, but the crowds were impenetrable.

“I had one daughter on my shoulder and another on my other shoulder. I could feel my youngest daughter was not getting enough oxygen so I tried to lift her up high too. I almost lost consciousness. I couldn't go back, I couldn't go forward. There were thousands and thousands of people pushing, pushing, pushing.”

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He saw others crushed to death. “I tried to help a woman on the ground, but she was taking her last breaths when I got there. People rushed over her, they were standing on her head, her face.”

There was a dead child beside her, he said. A boy, maybe five or six years old. “I saw them die in front of my own eyes,” he said. By the time they reached the

plane, his own two-year-old daughter had fallen unconscious. His wife, Fatima, was wearing only one shoe.

Hasenad is now recovering in hospital in north London, where the rest of the family remain in a hotel, awaiting updates on their next address. His four-year-old daughter, Dahura, “sometimes wakes up in the night, shouting ‘Go away!’ But the children are happy. “We feel safe. Here is like a haven for us,” said Rahmani, 37, who is still recovering from his wounds.

“I feel pain in my hand because the bullet went through my elbow. My hand doesn’t have the strength it once had, and I still can’t straighten it.”

The relief, however, is immense. “We will never forget the British kindness and what they did to get us out of Kabul. We just want to continue our lives in the UK. We want to forget our past.”

Sayed Wafa with his family including baby daughter, Madiha, born just 3 months ago

When Sayed Wafa’s baby daughter, Madiha, was born three months ago, the Taliban had yet to reach his home city of Kandahar. He had already been accepted for relocation to the UK as a former interpreter who had worked with the British forces, but he could not travel until his baby was issued with her own passport.

They applied but the passport never materialised. As Kandahar fell under Taliban control they fled with their baby and their three-year-old son, Wais.

“I could not stay in Kandahar another hour. I was a known person. I had to cut my hair, cut my beard, change myself. I told my wife, if I was killed, to go straight to the British embassy in Kabul.”

Taliban fighters were checking vehicles. “They were stopping the bus and looking in, checking phones, asking if anyone had worked with foreign forces.”

His wife, Shazia, 21, who worked in a beauty salon, hid his phone under her burqa, gambling that the Taliban fighters would not search a woman.

They finally reached the British embassy only to discover it had been abandoned. “At that moment, I was lost. I felt like a prisoner waiting for his execution.”

For five days and five nights they camped on the outskirts of the airport, unable to pass through the crowds. “There was no food, no shelter. My hands and face were burnt in the sun. My wife was pushed to the ground, holding our baby daughter.”

He can scarcely believe that one week later he and his family are safe, his son watching cartoons in their quarantine hotel in Swindon.

“My boy is asking lots of questions about what he sees. He’s happy. It is my first time in Britain but I feel like I’ve been here many times. I have heard so many things about Britain.” In Helmand, where he worked alongside British soldiers, there was a military base named Edinburgh.

“That one was full of dust.” He hopes one day to visit the real one. “It looks like a really nice city. Every day I am researching the culture and looking at the map.”

His children now cry much less, he said. “My boy has asked me a thousand questions. Why is this all happening? Why are we leaving here? Where are we going?” His father couldn’t answer them all then. “I hope I will be able to answer them now.”

Case study

Charlotte and Terry have welcomed five Afghan teenagers into their home in the East Midlands over the past 12 years.

Each of the boys had lost at least one parent. One had seen his mother killed.

“Their stories were different but [they] all wanted to get away from the Taliban,”

Charlotte said. “If they stayed they would either be killed or forced to join the Taliban.”

Their daughter was five when the couple, below, first decided to foster. Charlotte, 54, had worked with adults with disabilities while Terry, 58, a warehouse worker, had been in the armed forces. “We saw an advert for foster carers and thought we could do that,” she said.



Charlotte and Terry have welcomed five Afghan teenagers into their home

She remembers clearly their anxiety and nervousness when that first, scared 13-year-old boy walked into their life. “He set the house alarm off the first night which petrified him,” she said.

“He felt happier when our daughter was around. He enjoyed joining in games that didn’t require English. He adored school and was in such a hurry to learn,” said Charlotte, a foster carer for The Adolescent and Children’s Trust.

He stayed with them for four months before moving to another family. “Our next lad arrived two weeks later. We felt a bit more equipped this time,” Charlotte said. The 14-year-old, who “was so quiet for a long time” lived with them for four years.

Andy Elvin, the head of the trust, said the charity had had an “overwhelming” response to an appeal in an article in *The Times* for more foster carers to train and open their homes to young Afghan refugees.

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