

# OPERATION SOCCER BALL

By Ellie Duffy



This year as the Taliban swept back into power in Afghanistan, the Afghanistan's National Women's team was forced to flee into Pakistan. The players entered Pakistan through the north-western Torkham border crossing. The Taliban new rules meant that women and girls were banned from playing sports.

Khalida Popal use to be one of the most prominent figures on the Afghanistan's Women's football team. She now lives in Copenhagen, Denmark. A month ago, her phone flooded with messages from people she hardly knew. "We are desperate," said one. "Tell us what to do!" said another. "Will I ever play football again??"

The messages all came from players currently on the Afghan Women's National Team. As the Taliban retook the country, they were prime targets for the new regime. They had to escape.

Day and night, Popal sat on the floor of her living room in Denmark and fielded calls and texts with players and the immigration agencies, diplomats, and nonprofits who might help. She had become an organizer for a Herculean effort to rescue women's soccer players in Afghanistan. Popal's first order of business? She commanded all players left in the country to, "Burn your jerseys." That way, they would be harder for the Taliban to identify. One player hid her trophies behind the walls of her house.

But next Popal had to get the players out of the country and to safety. The task became known as **“Operation Soccer Ball,”** and soon, Popal had gotten the support of FIFA, the NFL, U.S. senators and dignitaries, and several countries. The national team stood in sewers for hours last month before boarding a flight to Australia, where they had been granted asylum. But there were more soccer players left in the country, including teenagers who were part of youth squads. Popal couldn't give up until everybody was out, and so last week, all 26 youth players, including their family and support staff, escaped to Portugal. They were the last group of players left in Afghanistan, and finally, Popal could get some sleep. In total, she helped rescue 380 Afghans connected to women's soccer.

**Dozens of Afghan girls with promising football careers, who fled the Taliban, have been told they can come to the UK to be resettled, along with their families.**

The 35-member squad - aged 13-19 - fled Kabul last month and have been staying for the past few weeks in a hotel in Pakistan, where their temporary visas were due to expire.

The girls faced having to return to Afghanistan if another country had not accepted them.

"This is fantastic news, and we are most grateful to Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Home Secretary Priti Patel for this life-saving decision," said Siu-Anne Marie Gill, CEO of the ROKiT Foundation, which supported their escape.

"I'm absolutely thrilled for them to have a second chance at life," said the chairman of the foundation, Jonathan Kendrick, who financed the operation to get them on buses out of Afghanistan and to stay in Lahore. "This is a whole new world they are taking on and I'm sure with the football community supportive to their plight, they will settle in and be able to experience all of the joys life gives."

Leeds United and Chelsea are among several British football clubs who have promised to support them in the UK.

The girls are now safe in the UK, and plans are being made to rehome them and their families. However, but they may not be able to stay as a team as they may be given homes in different areas around the UK.