

ARIZONA

# Phoenix family stranded in Kabul back in Arizona after help from resettlement workers, U.S. congressman

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Gina Palazzo, who teaches sewing to refugees building a new life in Arizona, on the morning of Aug. 16 received a frantic text message through WhatsApp from one of her adult students.

The text message was from a 30-year-old Afghan woman who had been living in Phoenix since 2016 but had returned to Afghanistan in May to visit her aging parents, along with her husband, 37, and the couple's 7-year-old daughter.

The family, all U.S. permanent residents, suddenly had found themselves stranded in Afghanistan following the sudden collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghan government and the shocking takeover of Kabul a day earlier by the Taliban.

"We are stuck in Afghanistan and we are in danger," the text message said. "Please if you have any way to get us out of here."

Palazzo quickly shared the text message with colleagues at Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest, the nonprofit refugee resettlement agency where she works.

She explained that the Phoenix family was in hiding in a neighborhood in Kabul. "The Taliban are everywhere and they are searching homes," Palazzo wrote.

The Taliban were searching for people who worked with the U.S. government and military forces now or in the past. The woman's husband, Palazzo wrote, had worked for the U.S. government from 2009 to 2013 before coming to this country so he and his family were in great danger.

"They are fearing for their lives," Palazzo wrote.

Palazzo and her colleagues at Lutheran Social Services jumped into action, putting aside their usual duties assisting refugees in Arizona to take on what had become a matter of life and death: helping the Phoenix family get out of Kabul.

In addition to maintaining daily contact with the woman and her family, the Lutheran Social Services team reached out to U.S. Rep. Ruben Gallego, D-Arizona

Gallego, along with his staff, worked with the U.S. State Department to relay critical information to U.S. military personnel staffing the gates at the airport in Kabul, including photos of the Phoenix family so that they could be identified at the gates.

In the meantime, for nine harrowing days, the Phoenix family traveled in secret day and night to the airport desperately hoping to get on one of the U.S. military planes evacuating Afghans. On one day, they were instructed by State Department officials to wear red scarves so they could be recognized as U.S. permanent residents by U.S. military personnel.

With evacuations set to end by Sept. 1, when the last U.S. military personnel were scheduled to pull out of Afghanistan, the Phoenix family was in a race against time.

The family finally managed to board a flight on Aug. 25, the day before suicide attacks outside a main gate at the airport killed scores of Afghans and 13 U.S. service members.

The family safely returned home to Phoenix on Sept. 8 after stops in Qatar, Germany, Pennsylvania and Indiana.

On Thursday, they had a chance to thank the staff of Lutheran Social Services along with Gallego, posing for photos during a meeting at the LSS offices in Phoenix. Palazzo could not attend. Her emails were shared with The Arizona Republic by colleagues who were involved with the rescue: Charlotte Shurtz, a faith and community engagement coordinator, and Jaclyn Taylor, a refugee and immigration services coordinator.

Gallego spent about 30 minutes with the family, who asked that their names not be published out of fear that relatives they left behind in Afghanistan could be targeted by the Taliban.

The 7-year-old daughter, who wore a green T-shirt printed with unicorns, pretended to take photos with her mother's cell phone or sat quietly with a coloring book.

She returned Monday to school in Phoenix, just five days after her family had arrived back in Arizona.

Her father pulled up a photo on his cell phone showing the girl curled up on the floor sleeping at the airport in Kabul shortly before they were evacuated. She is wrapped in a black and white striped blanket, pink sneakers on her feet.

The father said he worked as an interpreter and cultural adviser with the U.S. military in Kandahar province in southern Afghanistan. Because of that work, he and his family received special immigrant visas in 2016 to come to the U.S.

The couple said they left Phoenix for Afghanistan on May 7 and had planned to fly home on Aug. 20 after spending several months visiting relatives, including the woman's aging parents, who are not well.

They said many Afghans already living in the U.S. traveled to Afghanistan this summer because they wanted to visit relatives before the completion of the U.S. troop withdrawal, which was originally scheduled to end on April 1 but under the

Biden administration had been pushed back to Sept. 11, the anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks that triggered America's invasion of Afghanistan.

The couple said the first two months of their visit had gone smoothly but then they began hearing reports of the Taliban retaking control of large parts of the country.

They said no one expected the Taliban to take over the capital so swiftly.

The father said they traveled by taxi and on foot to the airport daily, sometimes during the day, other times in the middle of the night, trying to get in. But on most days they could not get near any of the gates.

He described being told to return home at one gate by Taliban soldiers before one soldier grabbed him from behind and a second soldier kicked him multiple times in the legs.

A video he pulled up on his phone shot at 4:58 p.m. on Aug. 19 shows the family standing amid a crowd of thousands of Afghans waiting in the heat trying to get to the airport. The gate they were trying to reach can be seen far off in the distance, black smoke rising. Gunshots can be heard in the background, which the father said were Taliban soldiers firing in the air for crowd control.

Finally, several days later around 11 p.m., the father said he received a text message instructing him to go to the north gate of the airport immediately. But the family could not go because his daughter was sick. A man called the next day telling him the west gate was open.

The family arrived at the west gate about 3:30 that afternoon after pushing their way through the crowds. The father described showing a U.S. soldier his green card and then being allowed into the airport.

Entering the airport "was like magic," the father said. "We just held each other. We made it."

He said they boarded a U.S. military plane with no seats at around 4 a.m. and sat on the floor surrounded by hundreds of other Afghan evacuees as the plane took off.

The father said before boarding the plane, "the only thing we were thinking about is getting out of Afghanistan."

But when the plane landed in Germany, they began to worry about the relatives they left behind.

The couple, with the help of an interpreter, Naqibullah Wakmal, told Gallego they remain fearful for the safety of relatives they left behind and asked the congressman if he could help get them out.

Gallego said the government of Qatar is taking charge of operations at the airport in Kabul and will be prioritizing the evacuation of American citizens, U.S. permanent residents and endangered Afghans who qualify for special visas because of their employment with the U.S. government and military.

Gallego encouraged them to begin the process of filing paperwork. But he acknowledged that at this point the chances of getting people out of Afghanistan will be difficult, even those who qualify for special visas because of their work with the U.S. government or military.

"There is a backlog," Gallego told the family. "And getting them out is the other problem."

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