

## *An Afghan competing in Tokyo's Paralympics finds solace in swimming.*



By Motoko Rich

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TOKYO — The first time Abbas Karimi jumped into a pool, the water brought fresh relief from the heat of Kabul, the Afghan capital.

For Mr. Karimi, 24, who was born without arms, it conferred a sense of freedom and protection. And it was swimming that would later propel Mr. Karimi — one of six athletes competing for the Refugee Paralympic Team in Tokyo — to flee Afghanistan when he was 16.

After winning a national championship in his homeland, he yearned to train for international competition without the daily fears of war and terrorism.

“I needed to be somewhere I could be safe and keep training and be a Paralympic champion,” he said in an interview on Zoom this month.

On Tuesday night, eight years after leaving Afghanistan, Mr. Karimi led the parade of nations into the stadium at the Paralympics’ opening ceremony as one of two flag bearers for the refugee team.

He is one of millions who fled the violence in Afghanistan long before the current crisis. And because the chaos surrounding the Taliban takeover and the U.S. withdrawal prevented Afghanistan’s Paralympic delegation from flying to Tokyo, he may be the only Afghan athlete to compete at the Games.

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