

## *How 2 Afghan Paralympians Defied the Odds to Get From Kabul to Tokyo*

Their evacuation and eventual arrival in Japan involved multiple stops and many helping hands.

By Motoko Rich, Yan Zhuang and Aurelien Breeden

Published Aug. 30, 2021 Updated Sept. 7, 2021

TOKYO — As his plane glided toward Tokyo, Andrew Parsons, president of the International Paralympic Committee, heard the bad news: two athletes from Afghanistan would not be able to fly safely from Kabul to Japan to compete in the Games.

Afghanistan, and in particular the airport in the capital, Kabul, had dissolved into chaos after the Taliban takeover two weeks ago, with thousands of desperate Afghans trying to evacuate. At a news conference shortly after Mr. Parsons landed in Tokyo, organizers announced that the two athletes — Zakia Khudadadi, 22, who had qualified in taekwondo, a sport making its Paralympics debut, and Hossain Rasouli, 26, a sprinter — would not attend.

“I hope they are spending their time safely in their own country,” said Toshiro Muto, the chief executive of the Tokyo organizing committee.

A week later, in a show of respect for the absent delegation, a Paralympic volunteer carried the Afghan flag during the march of athletes at the opening ceremony in the Olympic Stadium. It turned out that the moment was also a sign that the organizers hoped that the athletes might still make it to Tokyo.

On Saturday night, against the odds and after a weeklong behind-the-scenes scramble, Ms. Khudadadi and Mr. Rasouli landed at Haneda Airport in Tokyo accompanied by Arian Sadiqi, the head of the mission of the Afghan Paralympic Team.

Many details of their journey have not been disclosed, and officials have said that the athletes will not be speaking to the news media during the Paralympic Games. Several attempts to evacuate the athletes failed, and Paralympic organizers have said that their eventual arrival in Japan involved multiple steps and the assistance of many organizations and governments.

The athletes spent most of the past week in Paris, training at the National Institute of Sport, Expertise and Performance, a center for elite athletes, and receiving mental health counseling.

Mr. Parsons said that neither the International Paralympic Committee nor the Tokyo organizing committee was directly involved in the evacuation. In a statement issued shortly after the Afghan athletes arrived in Tokyo, he thanked “several governments”; the Center for Sport and Human Rights, in Geneva; Human Rights for All, in Australia; the French Paralympic Committee; the British Paralympic Association; and World Taekwondo.

According to a French sporting official who requested anonymity to discuss events he was not authorized to speak about publicly, the athletes contacted French diplomats in Kabul for help to get to Tokyo.

A group of human rights activists, lawyers and former athletes from Australia and Britain stepped in to provide assistance to the athletes, filling out paperwork and advising them on how to get from their homes to the Kabul airport and, once there, how to navigate the crush of people who crowded around its entrances.



People waiting to gain access to the airport in Kabul last week. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Alison Battisson, founder of Human Rights for All, which provides legal assistance for refugees, said she had worked with Nikki Dryden, a former Canadian Olympian turned human rights lawyer; Kat Craig, a British lawyer; and Craig Foster, a former Australian soccer player who now advocates for refugees, to lobby the Australian government to accept the athletes and coordinate with Australian troops stationed in Kabul.

Ms. Battisson said that when the Paralympians and other Afghan athletes arrived at the airport, they shared their locations using GPS tracking on their cellphones, so that the activists could direct them to the gates where they could be admitted by Western troops.

They gave the athletes advice like “hide your papers and your money in a bright scarf in your genitals, basically, and then when you pass through Taliban checkpoints, bring out your scarf and wave it like crazy,” Ms. Battisson said.

**Updates on Afghanistan** Sign up for a daily email with the latest news on the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Once the athletes had passed the Taliban checkpoints, Ms. Battisson said, “they got themselves noticed by Western forces.” She added: “There is none of this ‘the government saved them’ or anything else. It is: They got themselves out to safety, and we’re the support team.”

Ms. Battisson said she had lost contact with the athletes once they managed to get inside the airport. “I was very happy to hear they made it to Tokyo, because I had no idea where on the planet they were,” she said.

Ms. Khudadadi and Mr. Rasouli reached Paris after transiting through Dubai, said Mr. Parsons of the I.P.C. Ms. Dryden said that more than 80 Afghan athletes in all landed in Dubai after being evacuated from Kabul.

All of those athletes will be issued humanitarian visas to travel to Australia, according to Ms. Dryden. She said that the Afghan Paralympians, if they chose, would be allowed to settle in the country after completing their competition, adding that they seemed “grateful about the chance to come to Australia.”

Australia’s Department of Home Affairs declined to comment.

In Paris, where officials worked to keep the presence of the Afghan Paralympic athletes secret, they received basic clothing and health checkups. Interpreters helped the athletes make sure their papers were in order for travel to Japan. Most importantly, the French official said, the athletes needed to be committed to compete in the Games and prepare for the likely deluge of media attention once they arrived.

The French official said that several unspecified countries have offered assurances that the Afghan athletes will be welcome to resettle after the Games are over.

When the athletes arrived in Tokyo aboard an Air France flight on Saturday night, they were taken to the Paralympic Village, where Mr. Parsons, Chelsey Gotell, the chair of the I.P.C. Athletes' Council, and a handful of other officials met them.

### Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

"Of course, it was very emotional to see that in some way we had contributed to them to fulfill their dream," Mr. Parsons said. "They were of course very tired and a little bit lost. Everything had been so fast for them."

By the time they arrived, Mr. Rasouli had already missed his first 100-meter heat on Saturday. The organizers offered him a slot running a 400-meter event, but he suggested that the increase in distance might be too much of a challenge, and he is now scheduled to compete on Tuesday in a long-jump event.

Ms. Khudadadi will compete in the under-49-kilogram (about 108 pounds) category in taekwondo on Thursday and will be the first woman to take part in the Paralympics for Afghanistan since the 2004 Games in Athens.

The Afghan athletes join Abbas Karimi, a swimmer for the Refugee Paralympic Team who fled Kabul eight years ago and now lives and trains in the United States.



The Paralympian Abbas Karimi, right, an Afghan who competes on the refugee team, at the opening ceremony in Tokyo last week. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

The Paralympic organizers are fiercely guarding the Afghan athletes and will not permit interviews. They are being allowed to circumvent the so-called mixed zones that athletes typically pass through after their events to talk to journalists.

"Having the athletes here isn't about getting media coverage," said Craig Spence, a spokesman for the I.P.C. "This is about these athletes fulfilling their dream about getting to attend the Paralympic Games, and because human life and the well-being and mental health of the athletes are our top priority, the athletes will be doing no media during these Games."

Although the athletes are staying in the Paralympic Village, it is unlikely that they will have much chance to interact with athletes from other countries.

"The entire village is set up to keep people socially distanced, and several countries aren't even eating in the dining hall," said Blake Haxton, an American athlete who is competing in rowing and canoe sprint.

Given the coronavirus restrictions, athletes are mostly keeping to themselves. “I haven’t spoken much with athletes from other countries,” said Takayuki Suzuki, a swimmer from Japan. “When we cross paths, we would say ‘hi,’ but that’s about it.”

Matt Scott, a member of the U.S. men’s wheelchair basketball team, said that “there wasn’t any special bulletin or notification about the arrival of the athletes,” and that he hoped they could experience the Paralympic Village, calling it “one of the most accepting places on the planet.”

Motoko Rich reported from Tokyo, Yan Zhuang from Melbourne, Australia, and Aurelien Breeden from Paris. Gwen Knapp contributed reporting from Tokyo.