

Story SARAH HENDER

Forced to flee without my family

Fahima Ahmadi tells of her incredible escape from the Taliban-controlled Kabul to Australia

It is the sound of an old man crying as the door of the military plane closes on their homeland, that Afghan refugee Fahima Ahmadi can't get out of her head. There were hundreds of refugees sitting on the floor of the plane that day and many were crying. This was different.

It was not a sound Fahima had ever heard before.

"Afghan men don't cry," she explains.

But this was a man who was leaving the only home he'd ever known, where he'd raised his children, a country he knew he would never see again.

Fahima, watching this man crying and screaming into the scarf he had held up to his mouth, was mesmerised by his emotion, made all the more shocking by the realisation that she, herself, was feeling nothing.

"I was wondering what was wrong with me, why couldn't I cry? I see now it was the trauma. I had all that anxiety and stress dealing with this level of madness," Fahima says.

"But I didn't know who I was anymore if I wasn't feeling what was happening to me."

Fahima did cry, but not until she was in Australia.

She was by then in quarantine, in a hotel room in Brisbane, by herself.

Coming from a family of 11, Fahima had only ever shared a bedroom with her four sisters and now here she was, left alone to contemplate all the trauma she had just been through to get here.

Every night she phoned her sisters and told them to stay on the line until she fell asleep just so she could get through her dread of the lonely night ahead.

Fahima is a Hazara Afghan, a minority



group that has been subjected to years of oppression. In Afghanistan, it is mostly the Hazara women who seek out education and employment.

As an Afghan woman growing up in Kabul, life was tough anyway, even when you're not a minority.

Walking to school dressed in uniform was not easy.

There would be comments and sexual innuendo made by men along the way and if she complained, her mother would tell her if it got too difficult to simply stop going.

Fahima wasn't going to let that be an option. Later, when she attended

university she would walk there with friends to feel safe.

Later again, when she began working as an interpreter for an Allied military camp and then, as an inspection analyst for the US Embassy, she and her girlfriend would be harassed walking to work.

They had to hire a driver out of their own earnings to protect themselves.

She didn't know who these people were, she just knew she couldn't trust any of them, not even her neighbours.

And then the day came when the Taliban arrived to overtake Kabul and life got that much worse.

The day before the Taliban came, Fahima recalls being told by her supervisor to destroy all data that gave away any employee information.

She asked why, but was given no reason. There was talk of the Taliban coming but Fahima never thought it could happen, believing there were still Americans in the military bases. When she was told to go home early, she didn't know why or whether she still even had a job.

The next day, Fahima, determined to stay positive, suggested to her sister that they go shopping.

They visited the bank on the way. It was at the bank they saw signs of panic, with crowds lined up to get their money out.

Then the bank told her sister they had no more American money and they couldn't give her any. As Fahima and her sister began to argue with the bank, their father called them and told them to go home straight away.

Then the phone went dead.

The sisters started walking home. They could hear people saying the Taliban had overthrown the government and the President had left Kabul. Lines of cars were clogging the city's streets and crowds of people were crying and running.

Fahima and her sister began to run, too, but it wasn't easy to run in a burqa. Their brothers came to help them through the crowds and they made it home. The family didn't leave their home for the next two weeks. It was August 15, 2021.

Fahima's family knew they were at risk.

They had heard of entire families being killed by the Taliban in the provinces outside Kabul where a family member had worked for the foreign military (Fahima had worked as an interpreter and in data collection for both the US and Australia).

They knew they had to try to get out of the country. Evacuations took place over the next few weeks.

The family went to the airport half a dozen times at all different times of the day and night but the crowds were overwhelming, the heat of the day was suffocating and women and children were getting injured in the crush of the crowd.

Fahima was worried about her mother's health and how her two-



Fahima Ahmadi, top left, with the tight-knit family she has been forced to leave behind in Kabul and, above, the chaos at Kabul airport. Pictures: Supplied by family



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year-old niece would fare in that crowd. Each time they turned back. After three days of her family going back and forth to the airport, Fahima heard the US had stopped all flights.

But just when all hope was lost, Fahima received a letter from the Australian military providing the documentation she needed to get out, a recommendation that she be allowed to leave the country.

But she wouldn't be able to take her family with her.

Fahima's father told her she must leave, it was too much of a risk for her to stay, and her leaving might just protect the rest of the family.

At the airport, there were still those impenetrable crowds. The Australian military told Fahima to take a backpack filled with food and water and nothing else. She and a friend, a former colleague and her colleague's husband, went to the airport together.

What would normally be a 10-minute walk to the airport gate took them two days and a night to reach.

During that time, they sat in a concrete ditch in the surging crowd, coping with the oppressive heat, unable even to go to the toilet as Taliban soldiers patrolled the wall above them.

If the soldiers saw anyone stand up, they would hit them with the butt of their guns.

Fahima and her friends planned their strategy – wait until the soldiers turned away for a moment, push hard through the crowd, 100m at a time, and sit down again to await their next chance.

It was a long, slow process.

They saw things they would rather forget. Women and children were being carried out of the crowd, either dead or injured, and, all the while, they were conscious that just being in that crowd put them at risk of being bombed.

Once they got to the gate, Fahima and her friends were greeted by Australian soldiers who, on viewing their letter of recommendation, allowed them into the airport.

They saw many others turned away.

Fahima and her friends were taken to a holding area, and though the conditions they had just left were bad, this was a former canine camp for military dogs, overwhelmingly dirty and with no roof.

They slept that night in freezing conditions, with no warm clothing and nothing left to eat.

"I had no feeling. All I would say to myself is that behind you is a dangerous place and in front of you is hope," Fahima says.

"I tried not to think of leaving my family behind, I hadn't hugged them or even said goodbye to them as I thought I wouldn't make it out of the airport."

Fahima and her friends were lucky, they got a flight out the next morning. Some were not so lucky, their wait much longer.

Arriving in Dubai, Australian soldiers welcomed them, fed them proper food and provided stretchers for them to sleep on. No longer needing to be on constant alert



A relieved Fahima, second from left, with friends and an Australian soldier on the way out of Afghanistan following an ordeal stretching two days and a night. Picture: Supplied

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for her safety, Fahima could sleep at last.

It was good to be somewhere safe but Fahima's relief was tempered by the news that there had just been a bomb explosion at the airport in Kabul, at the same spot where they had themselves been waiting only a few hours earlier. Their fears realised, it was more trauma to digest.

The next two weeks were spent in a military camp in Dubai until, at last, Fahima was on a flight to Australia.

But despite all the hardships she had faced until then, it was at this point that Fahima was faced with her biggest struggle.

Before now she had only one goal – to get out. Now she faced a life yet to be built in an unknown land, alone, without her family, at the age of 23.

As she sat in her Brisbane hotel room

alone, dreading her nightly terrors, Fahima talked to herself about how she had to learn to deal with this hard stuff because there would be tough times ahead.

At the same time, Fahima knew she could handle it.

"In Afghanistan, there is anxiety and stress at every level of life, it makes you so tough," she says.

"Living in one room by yourself is a little problem compared to the things I've gone through."

Finally, with quarantine over, Fahima headed to Adelaide, a place where her friends knew of an Afghan family who could help them settle in.

Arriving with nothing, Fahima and her friends needed help to buy just basic provisions and clothing.

The government had organised housing for them. Six months on, Fahima now shares a house with seven others, all refugees of different nationalities.

She counts herself luckier than many others who are new to this country.

Being well-educated and with her ability to speak English, she recognises it has been easier for her to settle into life here.

Since arriving in Adelaide, she has started sales training for a phone company, obtained her learner's driving licence and is planning to study nursing at university.

There is a lot of day-to-day navigation though that still remains difficult.

Concerned about how her family is faring in Afghanistan, Fahima sends the bulk of her Centrelink payments to them.

None of them have been able to work since the Taliban came – her brother having lost his job and her sister, threatened several times by armed Taliban soldiers on her way to work, soon realised it was safer not to continue.

Fahima is certain her family are not being forthcoming about how well they are eating or the mental stress they are under.

The cost of looking after her family means Fahima can't afford things for herself like driving lessons, which would help her to better manage her life here, but her priority is to ensure her family are well.

Like many refugees who have arrived here in such traumatic circumstances, Fahima feels as if she straddles two worlds. This one where she is safe and free, and the other where all her loved ones live, unsafe and with no means of escape.

On the one hand she feels blessed that she is no longer in Afghanistan, but there are times she fears for and misses her family so much she wishes she was with them, no matter where they are.

But until Fahima is a permanent resident, she has no ability to argue a case for them to come out here to be with her.

So, where does she see herself in five years? Fahima laughs.

"It won't matter whether it's one year or five. I will still want my family with me. It doesn't matter how difficult life is, if you're with the people you love, life is easier."

If her family can't be here, Fahima is determined to get them out of Afghanistan to a safer country, but any such plan costs money, and plenty of it.

"Maybe later on if I work hard and get that much money I can do something," she says.

It is that sense of being able to do anything here that is so precious to Fahima.

"If I was in Afghanistan I would be helpless to do anything about our situation," she says.

"But here I am, free to do anything. I can study, I can work hard, I can find money and help my family. If I was there, we would all be in big trouble."

"It is a good thing I am here because at least now someone can help them."

On those hard days when she is missing her family, Fahima sometimes needs a reminder of why she is here.

One word. Freedom. ■