“We no longer have to be afraid”

Afghanistan is not front and centre in the news anymore, but the Taliban’s suppression of human rights continues apace. Among the most vulnerable citizens are women leaders and human rights advocates, and anyone who served under the previous government. Some have been able to escape to neighbouring countries, especially Pakistan, but their situation there is also precarious. To assist people in these groups, Canada created an expedited resettlement program called Operation Afghan Safety, in August 2022. St. John’s Refugee Assistance Group (RAG) has taken advantage of this program to sponsor a young couple who escaped to Pakistan, and is working closely with another group called Ottawa Centre Refugee Action in sponsoring and resettling two other vulnerable Afghan families. The preparations were challenging, because all three families arrived quite close together in August and September, but we are pleased to report that they are happily settling into comfortable apartments and looking forward to new beginnings in their lives.

The first to arrive, in August, were Wahida Azizi and Tajuddin Farzan. Wahida worked in the promotion of women's rights in the former Afghan government, where Tajuddin was also a civil servant. Their English is good, and they are being assisted in finding employment opportunities that will make the best use of their skills.



Wahida Azizi (l.) and Tajuddin Farzan (r.) celebrate the move into their new apartment with Tajuddin's sister and brother-in law and RAG members Margot and Brian Cameron.

The Hotak family of five and the Habibi family of seven arrived within two weeks of each other in September. The Hotak family, for which St. John's has primary responsibility, consists of Dr. Mohtarama Hotak (a practicing family doctor/G&O, until her departure from Afghanistan), her husband Dr. Khalid Hotak (general surgeon/provincial hospital director in Afghanistan), and their children: Haris (21) who endured a seven-week

kidnapping by the Taliban last fall, Bilal (15) and Zenat (10). Haris is interested in computer science, Bilal in chemistry and physics (as well as soccer!), and Zenat in science as well as English. In Mohtarama's words, they "no longer have to be afraid"…and Zenat will be able to go to school (where she excels), which would have been against Taliban law in Afghanistan.



Drs. Mohtarama and Khalid Hotak and their family arrive from Pakistan at the Ottawa Airport

The Habibi family of seven, for which Ottawa Centre Refugee Action has primary responsibility, consists of Dr. Emal Habibi, his wife Madina, his mother Fahima, his sister Nadia and three young children, Adnan (6), Usman (4) and Imran (2). Adnan and Usman have already started school. English-language assessments have been scheduled for all Hotak and Habibi family members and will be followed by English-language training – essential if these talented newcomers are to compete in the Canadian job market. They are all very keen to perfect their English and to find work.



Dr. Emal Habibi and family are welcomed at the Ottawa Airport by Jane Morisset, Chair of RAG (far right), and members of Ottawa Centre Refugee Action.

If you would like to know more about St. John's Refugee Assistance Group, please speak to Margot or Brian Cameron. RAG would love to have more hands to share the work, particularly in the beginning of a sponsorship when the application forms must be completed and again when the refugee(s) first arrive. In between, the engagement is not intense.