Afghan activist doctor receives award for refugee work in Turkey

KABUL: The Ankara-based IGAM Research Center on Asylum and Migration has recognized an Afghan doctor for her work helping refugees.

Zakira Hekmat, 33, was awarded $2,000 by the center, led by Metin Corabatir, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees's (UNHCR) former spokesperson in Turkey.

Hekmat, herself born an internally displaced person in Jaghuri district in Ghazni province, Afghanistan, said she considered herself lucky, which had driven her to help other Afghan refugees.

"I think that by giving back to my own community, I can best heal the pain of displacement, ruination of my homeland, and the suffering of my people," she told Arab News. "I was lucky enough to have a house to live in and a university to attend when I first came to Turkey, but not everyone was lucky like me. So, I wanted to help them with all my capabilities because I know they face many challenges."

Hekmat's Afghan Refugees Solidarity Association (ARSA), which she started in 2014, worked tirelessly throughout the coronavirus disease pandemic to help people in need, including with those who lost homes and jobs or were left vulnerable, and she was recognized in 2020 by Washington-based charitable organization HasNa as one of its Peacebuilders of the Year for her work.

She graduated high school living under the Taliban while doubling up as a teacher due to a shortage of female staff in her area. Hekmat then briefly attended Kabul University as an undergraduate before leaving for the medical faculty of Erciyes University in Kayseri, Turkey, and then working at an immigrant health center in the city, predominately serving refugees, many coming from neighboring Syria fleeing the country's civil war.

Hekmat said her formative years in Afghanistan shaped her identity. Teaching poor children in Ghazni, she said, shaped her lifelong commitment to social justice by reconnecting marginalized people with the rest of the society. Now her focus is on refugees, especially widowed women, refugee girls and children, by promoting education, language-learning, cultural programs, capacity building, child-focused activities, translation services for refugees and conducting awareness programs.

ARSA, she added, had worked on dozens of voluntary projects with the financial support of the UNHCR and the Turkish government, including setting up a network of 370 refugees volunteers in 58 cities across Turkey to help newly arrived refugees to settle into their cities, and producing and distributing items to protect them from the pandemic.

"By teaming up with our local volunteers, we produced protective masks and soap (to help prevent) contagion, and we distributed them free to NGOs in need across the country as well as to the refugees themselves," Hekmat said. Her network produced about 1,000 face masks per day, she added.

In addition, with the UNHCR, ARSA helped around 600 needy Turks and Afghans by providing them with essential supplies for the winter and delivered hygiene kits to over 6,000 families.

"I don't care much about the country of birth, but I attach high importance to the country where I can breathe and live freely," Hekmat said. "We can only overcome stereotypes and prejudices against refugees if we listen each other and come together around a cup of Turkish tea."

Her current work also focuses on child protection, stopping underage marriages and domestic violence, and promoting social cohesion and awareness campaigns about asylum-seekers. She has also launched a project for women refugees to design accessories and other handicrafts.

"They produced about 600 items (so far) and we provided the raw material for them. It became a source of livelihood for them and served as a pathway to self-accomplishment," she said.

Corabatir said Hekmat had acted as a bridge for more than a decade between each Afghan refugee and UN agencies in Turkey and had tried to solve their problems with an extensive network she established herself over years in the medical sector and through her charity activities.

"We intend to raise awareness about these charity works and introduce these people to the attention of the authorities. She also showed to her peers that they have rights to enjoy as refugees. It is essential that these people inspire other refugees for raising awareness and leading social change in their communities," Corabatir said.

Turkey is home to more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees and about 330,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers of other nationalities, including Afghans and Pakistanis, according to the latest data of the UNHCR.

Monitoring Desk

Meet the Afghan Canadian artist who created this year's World Refugee Day emoji

By: Nicholas Keung

Growing up, Hangama Amiri was always on the move with her family, searching for peace and security. And the UNHCR was always part of the young Afghan refugee's journey.

So, when the United Nations refugee agency invited her to design the 2021 World Refugee Day emoji for Twitter, she says, she just jumped at the opportunity as a way to give back to the organization that has helped her family all along, including bringing them to their new home in Canada in 2005.

"UNHCR is part of my history. It really makes a lot of sense for me to take on this project," the 32-year-old said from her studio in New Haven, where she lives after finishing a master's degree in fine arts from Yale University last year.

"We were helped by this international organization and it's an opportunity for me to give back. ... It's a real honor."

Amiri's design, officially launched on Twitter on Sunday, shows two hands reaching out from the East and the West, above and underneath a heart in blue, symbolizing the Mother Earth.

"This emoji represents love, support and togetherness. Heart is a universal symbol. Everyone sees the heart and knows that it's about love," explains Amiri, whose family resettled in Halifax by way of Pakistan and Tajikistan.

"The hands show the support, power and union, in circular motion between the heart."

The UN Refugee Agency has partnered with Twitter since 2016 to promote the event, held globally every June 20, to celebrate the resilience of migrants displaced by wars, conflicts, violence and natural disasters.

Social media is a central part of the advocacy and communication work of the agency, which has 2.5 million followers on Twitter and millions of supporters across different platforms such as Instagram and TikTok.

"It helps us to create solidarity with refugees online. Hundreds and thousands of people can tweet the emoji online and share their stories," says Pauline Elsière, a communications officer of the UNHCR office in New York. One of those shared stories will be Amiri's.

Born in Peshawar, Pakistan, Amiri and her family moved back to Kabul after the Russian invasion ended in 1989. When the Taliban came in 1996, they once again fled.

Her father, an engineer, would take the family to Tajikistan in 1999 before he left them behind for Denmark and Norway as he sought a lasting home for the family.

"My father was seeking asylum in Central Asia and Europe while we were in Pakistan and Tajikistan. We were separated from him most of the time under those hard circumstances. The only memories I had of him was the photos he sent us," recalled Amiri.

After spending six years in Tajikistan, Amiri, her mother and three siblings were resettled in Halifax by the UNHCR and Canadian government.

Growing up in constant chaos and limbo, Amiri said, she always found solace in drawing.

"It gives you a space to reflect. We all know what's going on outside. But somehow, the minute I hold the pencil and paper, and put my head down, there's like the whole other world," she says. "For me, it was like really meditative."

The new life in Canada was still full of challenges, with the new language and culture that couldn't have been more different than where they came from. The family remained apart from her father for another three years until he joined them here in 2008.

After finishing an undergraduate degree in fine arts from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University, Amiri became a Canadian Fulbright and Postgraduate Fellow at Yale.

While she studied painting and printmaking, she is also a textile artist known for her creations of large-scale textile "paintings" inspired by her Afghan heritage, with common Asian fabrics such as silk and satin and chiffon. Her works have been exhibited in Canada, Europe and the United States.

Amiri was busy preparing for her upcoming show in Toronto's Cooper Cole Gallery this September, when she was commissioned by the UNHCR for this year's emoji design.

"We live a fast-paced life. Dedicating an international day to refugees is a way for us to stop for a moment and reflect on the lives and situations of refugees and those who are displaced," says Amiri. "No one chooses to be a refugee. We all deserve to have a home and to be safe."

Nicholas Keung is a Toronto-based reporter covering immigration for the Star.

Blood transfusion resulting in saving most lives worldwide

World Blood Donor Day takes place on 14 June each year. In May 2005, during 58th World Health Assembly (WHA), ministers of health from all around the world unanimously declared their commitment and support towards voluntary blood donation and with resolution WHA58.13, they designated World Blood Donor Day as an annual event which will be held each year on 14 June.

The aim for marking the World Blood Donor Day is to raise global awareness of the need for safe blood and blood products for transfusion and of the critical contribution voluntary, unpaid blood donors make to national health systems.

The day also provides an opportunity to call to action to governments and national health authorities to provide adequate resources and put into place systems and infrastructures to increase the collection of blood from voluntary, non-remunerated blood donors. Transfusion of blood and blood products helps and save millions of lives every year. It can help patients who suffering from life-threatening conditions live longer and with higher quality of life, and supports complex medical and surgical procedures. It also has an essential, life-saving role in maternal and perinatal care. Access to safe and sufficient blood and blood products can help reduce rates of death and disability due to severe bleeding during delivery and after childbirth.

In many countries, there is not an adequate supply of safe blood, and blood services face the challenge of making sufficient blood available, while also ensuring its quality and safety. An adequate supply can only be assured through regular donations by voluntary unpaid blood donors. The WHO's goal is for all countries to obtain all their blood supplies from voluntary unpaid donors.

Safe blood and blood products and their transfusion are a critical aspect of care and public health. They save millions of lives and improve the health and quality of life of many patients every day. The need for blood is universal, but access to blood for all those who need it is not. Blood shortages are particularly acute in developing countries. To ensure that everyone who needs safe blood has access to it, all countries need voluntary, unpaid donors who give blood regularly. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, despite limited mobility and other challenges, blood donors in many countries have continued to donate blood and plasma to patients who need transfusion. This extraordinary effort during a time of unprecedented crisis highlights the crucial role of well-organized, committed voluntary, non-remunerated blood donors in ensuring a safe and sufficient blood supply during normal and emergency times.

For 2021, the World Blood Donor Day slogan is "Give blood and keep the world beating". The message highlights the essential contribution blood donors make to keeping the world pulsating by saving lives and improving others' health. It reinforces the global call for more people all over the world to donate blood regularly and contribute to better health.

A special focus of this year's campaign will be the role of young people in ensuring a safe blood supply. In many countries, young people have been at the forefront of activities and initiatives aimed at achieving safe blood supplies through voluntary, non-remunerated blood donations. Young people form a large sector of the population in many societies and are generally full of idealism, enthusiasm and creativity.

In Afghanistan, Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) on the occasion of marking the World Blood Donor Day is praising blood donors who are voluntarily donating blood to save lives of our countrymen. Based on information of Central Blood Bank, the number of those donating voluntarily blood in the country has increased unprecedentedly in recent years. Marking the World Blood Donor Day is a good opportunity for collecting blood for those in need.

Lailuma Noori

International community assures continued support to Afghanistan

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Afghanistan says continued support of the international community to future government of Afghanistan depends on women rights condition in the country.

USAID Mission Director Dr. Tina Dooley-Jones has said international community's continued assistance to Afghanistan is seriously depending on women participation at any political, economic and social agreement including the support of Afghan women and girls' rights.

"In case of any indifference or shadowing Afghan women, it is not okay for future Afghanistan government to count on support of the international community or donors," Dr. Tina said, adding that US is closely monitoring the case and will continue its support to Afghan women in restoration of their rights and empowerment and capacity building.

According to Dr. Tina, USAID has various programs to hear Afghan women voices about the country's peace process and problems facing Afghan women in the country.

"We hope Afghan women can make use of the environment they have created for themselves. We want to convince them to go ahead with development, democracy, access to peace, women rights and the right of access to health, education and economic opportunities they have achieved during the past 20 years," Dr. Tina stressed, adding that the US and NATO troops withdrawal process from Afghanistan won't put any impact on the USAID's activities in Afghanistan.

Dr. Tina hoped that the new chapter of partnership would help Afghanistan reach development.

Meanwhile, a number of Afghan elite women and members of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) in their interviews with The Kabul Times correspondent consider role of Afghan women in Afghanistan current situation as key.

"Role of Afghan women in politics is very significant as there is nothing in the humanity law that can prevent from presence of women in politics," said Sediqa Balkhi, a high-ranking member of High Council for National Reconciliation.

Mrs. Balkhi added that women like men could play vital role in society as women had the ability to express their visions; therefore, women should be given part in all affairs of a country as Islam has stressed on active presence of women. She further said that Afghan women have played effective role politics, governance and economic development during all periods of the past 20 years.

"Undoubtedly the current government as well as previous governments of Afghanistan have created open environment for women to make use of their capabilities and abilities for the betterment and development of Afghanistan," Mrs. Balkhi stressed, adding that Afghan women should be updated with any development in connection with peace and negotiations between Afghanistan government and Taliban as no process will be successful without presence of Afghan women.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) says in consideration to increasing insecurities in Afghanistan particularly remotes areas of the country there are limitations and problems facing Afghan women and the voice of women raised for livelihood and tranquility of women has not heard so far.

"Despite of all challenges and problems, Afghan women have had good progress in the field of politics as a number of Afghan women are ambassadors to foreign countries, showing that Afghan women have the capability to run big offices," said Latifa Sultani, director of AIHRC's women affairs.

Mrs. Sultani further said that it was the responsibility of the government to provide further opportunities to Afghan women so that they could make use of their talents and abilities for the development of their country.

This comes amid of US and NATO troops withdrawal from Afghanistan, increasing insecurities and efforts towards resumption of the intra-Afghan talks between Afghanistan government and Taliban. **Suraya Raiszada**