

Sports

Safe in Spain, Afghan women's basketball star hopes to play again

Bayat reached Madrid after 'nerve-wracking escape' from Kabul

BILBAO: As captain of Afghanistan's wheelchair basketball team and a women's rights activist, Nilofar Bayat fled for her life when the Taliban took over, seeking safety in Spain where she hopes to soon be back on the court.

Speaking to reporters in the northern city of Bilbao just days after arriving on a Spanish military plane, this 28-year-old athlete spoke of her shock at how quickly the Taliban swept into the capital Kabul and of her struggle to get out.

"I really want the UN and all countries to help Afghanistan, because the Taliban are the same as they were 20 years ago," she said. "If you see Afghanistan now, it's all men, there are no women because they don't accept women as part of society."

After a nerve-wracking escape, she and her husband Ramesh, who plays for Afghanistan's national basketball team, landed at an airbase just outside Madrid on Friday and are now starting a new life in Bilbao.

"When the Taliban came and I saw them around my home, I was scared and I started to think about myself and my family," said Bayat after the insurgents swept into the capital on August 15. "I've

been in too many videos and spoken about the Taliban, about all I've done in basketball and working for women's rights in Afghanistan. There can be a big case for the Taliban to kill me and my family."

With the help of the Spanish embassy she managed to secure a seat on a plane, and set off for the airport where she found scenes of chaos with the Taliban

“They don't accept women as part of society”

shooting and beating people to stop them reaching the airport.

"It was a really difficult day.. I've never seen this much danger in my country. I cried a lot, not because they beat me or my husband, but because of who had taken control of the country," explained

this former law student.

'Others are still there'

With the help of several German soldiers, they managed to get in but spent two days there in the blazing Kabul sun with "nothing to sleep on.. and not enough food" before finally being flown out on a Spanish military plane.

But she's acutely aware that in getting away, she was one of the lucky ones. "I'm luckier than other Afghan people in that I've left and am here and can start a new life. But I'm just one person, others are still there," she said.

When the Taliban were in power in the late 1990s, a rocket hit Bayat's family home when she was just two-years-old. In the attack, her brother was killed, her father was injured and she lost a leg.

"They changed my life forever, they caused pain and something that I'll carry forever in my life," said Bayat. "I am the best proof of how dangerous the Taliban are.. and how living in Afghanistan is hard and difficult: there is no future and no hope."

In a country where many people have been left with disabilities due to the



BILBAO: The captain of Afghanistan's women's wheelchair basketball team Nilofar Bayat poses in the Spanish Basque city of Bilbao on Monday. —AFP

attacks or polio, Bayat became interested in wheelchair basketball after seeing the men play and went on to play a key role in setting up an Afghan women's team. "When I'm in the gym and playing basketball, I forget what's happening in my country and also that I have a dis-

ability," she said. She came to Spain with the help of a Spanish journalist friend and has received "many offers" to play with wheelchair basketball teams, including one from Bidaideak Bilbao BSR, with whom she hopes to start playing "as soon as possible". —AFP

Australian coach blazes trail for women in African basketball

NAIROBI: When she was growing up in Australia's biggest city of Sydney, Liz Mills dreamt of one day becoming a professional basketball coach. Little did she know that she would end up having fame thrust upon her thousands of kilometers away in Africa, where she has made history as the first woman to coach a men's basketball team in a continental tournament.

After a decade in Africa, Mills is now head coach of the Kenyan Morans and in just a short time has steered them to their first AfroBasket championship in 28 years. From Australia, Mills started out on her African adventure in 2011 in Zambia, where she coached the Heroes during the 2011-2012 season and they ended up winning the national championship.

"I was a bit of rarity... I felt discriminated in terms of opportunities," she

says, adding that she was often overlooked because of her age and her gender. Mills says she is now proud to be a "pioneer" as a female coach. "I hope that I've been able to inspire especially female coaches in Africa to start working with men's teams as well as women's teams across the continent."

But she says that in 2021 she should not be the first woman to be coaching a national men's basketball team, and called on federations to do more to engage women and girls. "I am planning on holding the door open and encouraging as many women through the door... so hopefully in the next couple of years it will be the 100th or 500th to do what I've done this year."

Having served as deputy coach of the national Zambia and Cameroon men's basketball teams, Mills joined the Kenyan Morans in January this year. After last

appearing at AfroBasket in 1993, the team make their return to the top-tier continental championships which run the Rwandan capital Kigali from August 24 to September 5.

'More inches'

"Back in 2012 I said in Zambia that I wanted to be the first woman to coach at the AfroBasket," says Mills. "Qualifying the Kenyan Morans is a dream which has come true. There have been a lot of ups-and-downs to get here, but I am very happy to have been able to achieve this."

On the court, she wears knee-high black leather boots and black jeans along with a red team polo shirt, saying the heels give her "more inches" alongside the towering players. Mills saw the Morans edge out 11-times African champions Angola 74-73 in Cameroon in February to break their almost three-decade absence from the continent's basketball showpiece. She voices confidence that African basketball is heading for bigger and better things.

"I think the standards are only getting



NAIROBI: Kenyan Men's National Basketball team head coach Liz Mills (center) talks with the national team after the training session at the Nyayo national stadium gymnasium in Nairobi on August 20, 2021. —AFP

better and better, with the development of the NBA academies, Giants of Africa, Basketball Without Borders, independent camps for juniors and academies. With all these structures in place, basketball in Africa is trending in the right direction."

Asked about the secret of her own

success as a coach, Mills puts it down to her philosophy of building good relationships with her players. "Players don't care about how much you know until they know how much you care about them, and not just a player but as a person on the court." —AFP

Kuwait women's handball team heads for Bosnia training camp

KUWAIT: Kuwait women's handball team leaves today to Bosnia for a training camp in preparation for the 18th Asian Women's Handball Championship, due to be hosted by Jordan on September 15-25. The 'Blue' team will be within Group B along with Jordan, Afghanistan, India, Iran and Japan, as this championship is a qualification for World Cup scheduled to be hosted by Spain at the end of this year. Women's Handball Committee Vice President Dr Dalal Hussain said yesterday that the 10-day camp comes in preparation for the first abroad participation, hoping to strengthen the player's performance and achieve a great level. Meanwhile, the team's coach Bobaker Zermani said despite the short period of preparation, the team is ready for this championship as the camp would also improve their level for more upcoming events. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Members of the Kuwait women's handball team, management and coaching staff. — KUNA

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