

Escaping Kabul

Afghan Women's Cycling team escape Afghanistan

Report by Four Corners - Australian Broadcasting Commission, June 15 2026

This is the dramatic story of a secret effort to get members of a women's cycling community out of Afghanistan.



The Afghan cyclists who fled to pursue their Olympic dreams

In August 2021, the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan's capital Kabul after 20 years of war. Any hopes of emancipation for the Afghan people were abruptly dashed, giving way to a systemic crackdown. One of the first things they did was ban women from playing any sport, putting female athletes in danger.

Women and athletes became particular targets, accused of embodying "deviant" practices. Among them was the Afghan women's cycling team. Founded in 2010 and set to compete internationally, it found itself under threat. In a society governed by a strict interpretation of Islamic law, women's cycling was once again banned, considered a source of dishonour – with transgressions punishable by death.

Afghanistan's female cycling team knew they were in immediate danger. The Taliban considered the all-female athletes—as infidels who violated the Quran, because the clothes they wore to engage in sports allowed men to see the shape of their bodies.

But with the help of a former World Champion, an Israeli-Canadian philanthropist, five young women from the national cycling team managed to escape to a town in northern Italy. Some of them are now hoping to become the first cyclists to ever represent Afghanistan at the Olympics.

One of the young women, Reihana rode through waves of dust and dread, training her mind on the coming race instead of the nearing Taliban. Her drive to compete won out over fear. She finished the ride and went home to the house she shared with her parents, older brother, James, and little sister, Hania. She fell asleep in her room, surrounded by trophies, medals, and ribbons.

The next morning, her uncle called with a warning: The Taliban were coming.

“Take nothing—just run,” her uncle said. “If they find you, they will kill you!”

Reihana darted around her room, filling her arms with papers that identified her as an athlete. In the backyard, she lit them on fire and watched her identity burn. Years of dreams and victories vanished in a plume of smoke.

Her father gathered documents while her mother packed water and snacks. They would drive four hours to Kabul, where they could stay with family and try to catch a flight out of the country. Some of their treasured possessions—bicycles, snowboards, trophies—would identify them as infidels and put their lives in danger. Reihana’s heart ached to leave her bike. Would she ever see it again? There wasn’t much time to wonder.

Taking nothing more than a backpack each, the family of five piled into the car and sped towards the airport, past trucks full of Talib soldiers streaming in. Fighters dusty from battle rode in pairs on motorbikes, the passengers carrying rocket-propelled grenades slung over their shoulders.

Through the car window, she scanned her city for any sign of resistance. Where were the Afghan soldiers? Where were the police? As they drove past the police station, she saw that the Afghan flag, with its stripes of black and red and green, no longer flew over the building. In its place was the black-and-white Taliban flag. It is over, she thought. It is finished.

With formal evacuation routes closing, a group of international cycling officials, diplomats and humanitarian workers began building a high-risk escape plan for the girls across Afghanistan's borders. Unable to escape from the Kabul airport, humanitarians across the globe worked together to carry out this dramatic and complex operation, which brought the cyclists from Afghanistan to Europe via Tajikistan and Albania.

A regular public passenger bus was organised to transport the girls from Kabul to Mazar-e-Sharif in the north. Fake passports had been arranged through Italy, (because the Taliban were no longer issuing passports). The bus accommodated ordinary people as well as the athletes, to make it look like a regular transport bus. The plan was to cross the border and escape through Tajikistan. However, when they reached Mazar-e-Sharif, the group were detained and put into a holding house, but after a few days with the help of some bribery, they were released and told that they must return to Kabul.

The bus set off with its passengers making a direct line south towards Kabul, but once they believed they far enough away from Mazar-e-Sharif they made a direct turn to the west and headed for Turkmenistan, which they believed they could use as a transit country, before going on to Albania then Italy. The problem was, the passports were still at Mazar-e-Sharif. Taking a large sum of money to use as a bribe, one very brave individual drove back to Mazar-e-Sharif to retrieve the passports.

The problem was, officials at Turkmenistan only gave them a certain number of hours to be in their country. It was a race against time, but the brave individual turned up with the passports just in time. The passports however presented a problem because one official recognised them as being fake. Handing over another large sum of money, and trying to appeal to whatever human kindness there might have been in the official, it was explained that should these passengers return to Kabul they would be executed.

Miraculously the official allowed them to board a plane to Albania, and from Albania they flew to Italy. The five athlete girls were given a safe place to live – some in Canada and some in Switzerland. But they will never be able to see their families again. The girls have plans to compete in the next Olympics.

Questions

1. Who is the Taliban and when did they take over Afghanistan? (for you to research)
2. Why did the Taliban object to women cyclists?
3. How would you describe the women athletes in terms of character?
4. Why couldn't they escape the country by plane?
5. Who assisted the girls in the dramatic escape plan?
6. Outline the steps of the plan.
7. What went wrong?
8. How were the problems overcome?
9. Draw a map of their escape route. List all the countries involved in their escape.
10. Where are the girls living now and what are their plans for the future?