



INDEPENDENT

Afghanistan's all-girl robotics team banned from entering US - but their robot will be allowed in

The six girls wept when they heard they couldn't escort their machine to Washington DC for an international robotics challenge

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Six teenage girls from Afghanistan have been denied visas to travel to the US for an international robotics competition, but they will be permitted to send their ball-sorting contraption to compete without them.

The aspiring inventors wept when they heard they couldn't escort their machine to Washington DC for the First Global Challenge, an annual contest for high school students from across the world.

They had twice trekked around 500 miles from Herat, a western city in Afghanistan, to the American embassy in Kabul to apply for the one-week travel visas.

But their efforts proved to be in vain as US officials rejected their applications following a series of interviews.

Afghanistan's first female tech boss Roya Mahboob, who founded software firm Citadel, organised the all-girl team and said they were "crying all day" after they were turned down.

She told [Forbes](#): "It's a very important message for our people. Robotics is very, very new in Afghanistan.

The girls are still working on a ball-sorting robot which they will send to compete against 163 other machines at the First challenge in July, and they will appear at the event via video link from Herat.

Graduate students from Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania helped the students to programme their robot, but the team had to wait for months while customs officials inspected the raw materials of their contraption amid fears that Isis could use robots to wage terror across the region.

Team Afghanistan's robot now has permission to travel.

One of the team members, Fatemah, 14, told Forbes: "We want to show the world we can do it, we just need a chance."

First Global President Joe Sestak said the girls were "extraordinarily brave young women" and told Forbes he was disappointed they weren't allowed to travel to the US.

Only the teams from Afghanistan and Gambia have been denied travel visas, while students from Iran, Iraq, and Sudan are able to attend.

US State Department records state that just 32 business travel visas were granted for Afghans in April, far fewer than the 138 issued to Iraqis or the 1,492 applications accepted in Pakistan during the same month.

Jonathan Blanks, a media commentator and researcher at the Cato Institute, tweeted: "I feel safer now that we've denied a once in a lifetime opportunity to a group of girls whose country we've been bombing since their birth."

Verizon's former vice president of communications Anthony Citrano called the decision "infuriating".

The State Department has not commented on the visa denials because they are confidential records.