With the withdrawal of US troops and diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan, and the simultaneous collapse of its civil institutions, the news is filled with daily reports of the humanitarian crisis left behind. Of those in dire jeopardy, the plight of women who rose to become judges in the 20 year span without Taliban rule and oppression must spark a particular sympathy and concern from those in Vermont pledged to further the rule of law. As explained below, we developed great admiration and affection for many of our Afghan colleagues, and seek now to call attention to the need to bring them immediate assistance.

Between 2004-2014, more than 35 women judges from Afghanistan came to Vermont with their interpreters, in groups of 4-7, to study the justice system here, and exchange views with many of our judges and lawyers, based on their country’s efforts to restore a civil judiciary, with emphasis on the rights of women & girls. The program was sponsored by the Rural Womens’ Leadership Institute, a project led by Hon. Patricia Whalen, Magistrate (Ret); Justice, International War Crimes Tribunal for Bosnia/Herzegovia (Ret). At both Judicial College, and in various courts around the state, we participated in a curriculum Judge Whalen designed to address our guests’ interest in making comparisons between the judicial systems in our two countries. Each of us led discussions on the role of the judge. A critical component of the exchange was the opportunity for the judges to engage in community activities in Vermont, staying with families, sharing potluck meals, meeting with local leaders in all walks of life, particularly women.

As interested as the Afghan judges were to absorb everything about their Vermont experience, we always felt that we more greatly benefitted by the example of their great courage and commitment to work that put them at risk every day. To overcome the initial disrespect faced by women taking the bench in Afghanistan is incomprehensible from our perspective. Threats in open court, even in the presence of security personnel, were commonplace. Adjudications involving sending men to prison, or restricting access to their children, involved palpable possibilities of reprisal. Yet, our colleagues were intensely proud of their leadership roles in the justice system, and deeply aware of the example they set for other young women and girls in Afghanistan.

Since the takeover by the Taliban, none of the judges can go to work. Most went immediately into hiding. One of the judges working for the Supreme Court has been assassinated. With the Taliban’s opening of the prisons, the threat of retaliation is the more terrifying. Working with the International Association of Women Judges, (IAWJ), an annual sponsor of the Vermont Afghan Women Judges Project, Judge Whalen has been continuously engaged in an exhausting effort to evacuate women judges, and their families. Comprised of a core group of 7 judges from different countries, the IAWJ rescue effort succeeded in evacuating a number of judges and family members, totaling approximately 100 people, before the flights from Kabul were suspended. Judge Whalen and the IAWJ group, aided by the same interpreters who staffed the Vermont project, have maintained open 24 hour zoom contact with the many women judges who still remain in Afghanistan, as many as 900 including family members. Judge Whalen describes the current state of affairs as follows:

*“Our work has changed. We are no longer heartbeat to heartbeat walking with our judges as they made countless attempts to get through Taliban checkpoints to try and make it through sewers to the gates of the airport. Those days already seem like an old nightmare. Now we are working with lists, verifying dates, vetting every source of potential rescue, raising money, looking for visas from every country that cares, negotiating with governments for assistance, trying to keep the issue alive in the press, finding lawyers to represent those who are out and looking at how we can sustain this for what may be the long haul. All this is done while interpreters stay in contact with the women 24/7, answering the endless questions that cannot be answered. When can we get them out? We do not know. We are cooperating with groups that hope to be able to evacuate. The security picture changes by the hour, plans are made, plans are scrapped. The behind the scenes people who are helping us deserve medals and recognition. Someday we hope to thank them appropriately.”*

Please inquire further about the IAWJ rescue efforts by going to its website, where there is an opportunity to make a donation.  [IAWJ Afghan Relief Fund](https://www.iawj.org/content.aspx?page_id=5&club_id=882224&item_id=67931) . At present, the Afghan women judges do not have a pathway to visa status to enter the United States. Sen. Patrick Leahy, and others, have petitioned the administration for a Humanitarian Visa that would recognize that special status for those such as the Afghan women judges who are likely to be targeted by the Taliban. Even with the recognition of a special status allowing for expedited relocation, it will be essential to insure financial assistance typically provided to those in the refugee resettlement program. We have made these concerns known to the Administration and our Congressional delegation, and urge others to do the same.

Respectfully

Amy M. Davenport, Chief Trial Judge (Ret)

John P. Wesley, Superior Judge (Ret)