

From dream to nightmare

Afghan ‘Little Messi’ forced to flee as one of thousands of Afghans displaced by war

AFP | Kabul, Afghanistan

Murtaza Ahmadi moved the world with his love for footballer Lionel Messi in 2016. His dream of meeting the Argentinian came true, but now the seven-year-old boy is living a nightmare as one of thousands of Afghans displaced by war.

Murtaza and his family abandoned their home in southeastern Ghazni province in November, along with hundreds of others fleeing intense fighting after the Taliban launched an offensive in the previously safe area.

Now they are among the thousands of similarly uprooted people struggling to get by in Kabul, and also living with the fear that the Taliban are hunting for their famous son.

The image of Murtaza sporting a makeshift Messi jersey -- made of a blue and white striped plastic bag and with Messi's name and famous number 10 written carefully on the back in felt-tip pen -- flooded media and social networks in 2016.

The media hype drew the football superstar's attention, and that year Murtaza met his idol in Qatar, where he walked out onto the pitch clutching Messi's hand as a mascot for a Barcelona friendly.

Messi, a UNICEF goodwill ambassador, also gave his tiny fan an autographed jersey and a football.

But the moment of happiness has quickly dissipated.

AFP met with the family recently in the cramped room in Kabul they are renting from another impoverished family, where Murtaza's mother Shafiqah told how they had fled their home district of Jaghori in the night after hearing gunshots.

"We couldn't take any of our belongings, we left only with our lives," she said, her face half hidden by a scarf.

The family belongs to the Shi-



Murtaza Ahmadi, a supporter of Argentine footballer Lionel Messi, playing outside his home in Kabul

ite-denominated Hazara ethnic group, who were targeted by the Sunni Taliban in their November operation in Ghazni.

The UN says up to 4,000 families fled, with witnesses describing "absolute terror" to AFP. Hundreds of civilians, soldiers, and insurgents were killed in the fighting.

The fear felt by the Ahmadi

family was ratcheted up when they learned that the Taliban were searching for the small Murtaza by name.

"(They) said if they capture him, they will cut him into pieces," Shafiqah said, her eyes horrified. Sports were rarely tolerated under the 1996-2001 Taliban regime, and the Kabul football stadium was a well-known ven-

ue for stonings and executions.



We couldn't take any of our belongings, we left only with our lives

MURTAZA'S MOTHER SHAFIQA

Murtaza and his family abandoned their home in southeastern Ghazni province in November, along with hundreds of others fleeing intense fighting after the Taliban launched an offensive in the previously safe area.

ue for stonings and executions.

Shafiqah said she hid her famous son's face with a scarf to prevent him from being recognised as they fled.

They took refuge first in a mosque in Bamiyan, before arriving in Kabul six days later. Among their belongings left behind are the football and jersey signed by Messi.

'I miss Messi'

Although Afghan security forces have beaten back the Taliban in Jaghori, the family says it no longer feels safe.

"The danger of the Taliban coming back is high, going back is not an option," Shafiqah said.

The attention they received as a result of Murtaza's fame has added to their fears, she continued.

"Local strongmen were calling and saying, 'You have become

rich, pay the money you have received from Messi or we will take your son'," she said.

"At night we would sometimes see unknown men, watching and checking our house, and then the calls. During the days, we wouldn't dare let him outside home to play with other children."

The family have already fled once before, to Pakistan in 2016, where they sought asylum in "any safe country".

They returned reluctantly to Jaghori after their money ran out, Shafiqah said.

Murtaza's father Arif remains in Jaghori working as a farmer while his family lives in Kabul under precarious conditions, with inadequate shelter, food, water or sanitation available to the refugees.

They are among the more than 300,000 Afghans -- 58 percent

of whom are under the age of 18 -- who have fled their homes due to violence since the beginning of this year alone, according to the most recent tally by the UN's agency for humanitarian affairs.

Homayoun, Murtaza's eldest brother who made him his plastic jersey, says that even in Kabul he is afraid. "We are worried something bad will happen if they know who Murtaza is," he said.

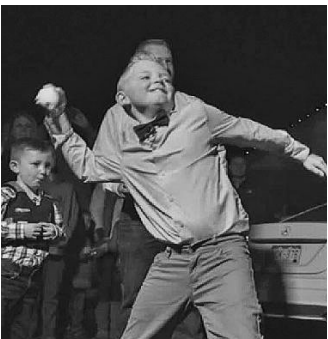
Little Murtaza, meanwhile, says he misses his football and his jersey from Messi.

"I want them back so I can play," he told AFP.

"I miss Messi," he added.

"When I meet him, I will say, 'Salaam' and 'How are you?' Then he will reply saying thank you and be safe, and I will go with him to the pitch where he will play and I will watch him."

Boy overturns Colorado ban on snowball fights



Mayor McLeod watches as Dane excitedly throws his first legal snowball

Los Angeles, United States

A nine-year-old boy in Colorado this week threw his first snowball -- legally -- after a battle to overturn a century-old ordinance banning snowball fights in the small town of Severance.

Dane Best said he decided to take on local authorities and persuade them to change the law by using simple logic.

"Today's kids need reasons to play outside," Best said on

Monday as he appeared before the town trustees, local media reported.

"Research suggests that a lack of exposure to the outdoors can lead to obesity, ADHD, anxiety and depression."

He said the nearly 100-year-old measure, which bans throwing any stone or missile, including snowballs, was outdated and meant any kids throwing snowballs were breaking the law.

"The children of Severance want an opportunity to have a snowball fight like the rest of the world," Dane told the trustees. "Kids want to have snowball fights without breaking the law. Kids want to have a voice in our town."

His arguments won over the board, which unanimously voted to tweak the ordinance to allow snowball fights.

The boy said his little brother would be his first target and that he would avoid breaking windows.

US woman sues Hilton for \$100mn over shower video

New York, United States

A Chicago woman is suing Hilton Worldwide for \$100 million saying that she was filmed naked in the shower by a hidden camera while a hotel guest -- in footage uploaded with her name onto multiple porn sites.

The unnamed plaintiff sued the hotel giant for negligence citing "severe and permanent psychological injuries," "severe mental anguish, emotional distress and other damages" such as medical expenses and loss of earnings.

The woman was a guest at a Hampton Inn and Suites hotel in Albany, the capital of New York state, in July 2015 while taking a bar exam after graduating from law school.

She was recorded, fully nude, while taking a shower by a hidden video camera, the 19-page lawsuit claims.

But she was blissfully ig-

The extortionist then demanded an immediate hush payment of \$2,000 followed by \$1,000 a month for a year, the lawsuit claims, also alleging that other people were recorded in the same room at the same Hampton Inn.

norant until September 2018, more than three years later, when she received an email saying "this is you right?" with a link to the video on a porn site published with her full name.

The same person, claiming "I'm a perv," then sent multiple threatening emails, professing to know where she went to university and where she worked.

When the threats went unheeded, the video appeared on a string of other porn sites.

Colleagues, friends and former classmates received a new version of the video, sent from a fake email address set up in her name.

"We take the safety and well-being of our guests incredibly seriously, and find the details included in the civil filing distressing," said a spokesperson for Hilton, the parent company of Hampton Inn.

"We commit to supporting the independent ownership and management of the property as they investigate, respond and cooperate with any law enforcement investigations," the statement added.

A spokesperson for the Hampton Inn in question said they were "shocked and stunned to learn of the allegations" late Monday, saying that no recording devices "of any kind" had been discovered at the property promising to hold accountable the perpetrator.

Bush to be buried after four-day tribute

Houston, United States

George H.W. Bush was laid to rest Thursday, concluding a four-day tribute to the 41st president that saw America briefly set aside its political divisions.

After a state funeral Wednesday in Washington that was attended by the country's five living presidents and foreign dignitaries, Bush's flag-draped coffin was flown to Houston.

Bush will be interred at his presidential library in College Station next to his wife Barbara, who died in April, and their daughter Robin who died of leukemia at age three.

At the memorial service President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania shared a front row pew in the National Cathedral with past presidents Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter and their wives.