

Three Afghan Women Honored as Human Rights Heroes at Lantos Human Rights Prize Ceremony

Lantos Prize awarded against the sobering backdrop of the Taliban's ongoing assault on women's rights

WASHINGTON, DC, USA, May 18, 2022 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A trio of remarkable Afghan women were honored this week with the Lantos Human Rights Prize, bestowed annually by the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights & Justice. The three trailblazing women – Judge Fawzia Amini, Roya Mahboob and Khalida Popal – have each made a tremendous contribution to empowering the women of Afghanistan and furthering their basic human rights, working within their respective fields of law, tech and sports.



The three Lantos Prize recipients: Judge Fawzia Amini, Roya Mahboob, Khalida Popal.

The 2021 Lantos Prize ceremony took place against the sobering backdrop of the Taliban's ongoing assault on women's rights and its steady march towards undoing all the progress achieved by Afghan women over the past two decades. Earlier this year, the Taliban reneged on its promise to reopen secondary schools for girls. Just this month, the Taliban-controlled government issued new restrictions on both women's freedom of movement and dress, announcing that they will be expected to stay home and cover themselves head-to-toe, if and when they venture out.

Khalida Popal, co-founder and former captain of the Afghan National Women's Football (Soccer) Team, spoke passionately at the Lantos Prize ceremony about the hope that Afghan women and girls felt during the last 20 years of increasing freedom and the dangers they now face following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. "When I started encouraging young girls to play sports, to raise their voices and stand against the ideology of the Taliban, I didn't know that soon

the show would be over,” she said. “Today the enemy is outside the door and women have no protection.”

Ms. Popal continued, “I will never give up being the voice for my sisters back in Afghanistan. But I want to urge you to remember that the problem of Afghanistan is not the problem of the Afghan people, it is everyone’s problem – a crisis of humanity. Let’s not forget the brave women of Afghanistan. Join us in being the voice for our sisters. Let them dream, let them see they are not alone and keep hope.”

Fellow Prize recipient Roya Mahboob, Afghanistan’s first female tech CEO and co-founder of the Afghan Girls Robotics Team, lamented that much of Afghanistan’s talent has

been forced to flee the country in the wake of the Taliban regaining power, saying, “These people are the human rights activists, the judges, intellectuals, educators, women’s rights activists and

others who have had the highest hopes for their nation. They are the very soul of Afghanistan, and now they are in exile.” She continued, “Not even the collapse of a nation and mass evacuation of the population can stop an educated girl...Policy makers and leaders need to support girls’ and women’s education more than ever, so that we can dream of the day that the girls of Afghanistan and counterparts in countries across the region, who represent a vast and underutilized potential, will be able to achieve their dreams just like I did.”

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Khalida Popal

Unlike the other two recipients who left Afghanistan several years ago, Judge Fawzia Amini, the former head of Afghanistan’s Violence Against Women Court, fled the country in 2021. She had ruled in hundreds of cases of violence against women – including a high-profile sexual abuse case brought by Khalida Popal against powerful leaders of the Afghan Football Federation. When the Taliban took power, they emptied the prisons of many of the violent criminals that Judge Amini had put behind bars and who quickly began threatening her life. Since escaping Afghanistan, Judge Amini has focused on advocating for the nearly 100 women judges who remain in danger. Upon accepting the Lantos Prize, she said, “At this memorable moment of my life, I want to remember the women of my country and their pain. They have lost all their fundamental and basic rights. I hope that the world will not leave us



The three Lantos Prize recipients with Lantos Foundation President Katrina Lantos Swett.

alone.”

The Lantos Human Rights Prize, named in memory of the late Congressman Tom Lantos, honors and brings attention to heroes of the human rights movement and high-profile public figures that use their platform to advocate for human rights. The three 2021 Lantos Human Rights Prize recipients join a distinguished group of laureates including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Professor Elie Wiesel, the real-life hero of the film Hotel Rwanda Paul Rusesabagina, Israeli President Shimon Peres, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Iraqi Parliamentarian Vian Dakhil, Hong Kong Democracy activist Joshua Wong, and Bill Browder, the driving force behind the global Magnitsky movement, among others.



The three Lantos Prize recipients spontaneously raise their arms in solidarity with each other and all Afghan women.

At the Lantos Prize ceremony, held in the Members Room of the Library of Congress on May 17, Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, President of the Lantos Foundation, spoke of the three 2021 Lantos Prize awardees as “trailblazers who charged right through the doors of freedom and opportunity when they began to open. In courts of law, in the globally male-dominated world of tech entrepreneurship, and on the soccer pitch, these women were leaders and they inspired other Afghan women to dream big, to do hard things, to test the limits of their potential, and to defend their rights under the rule of law.”

The Prize ceremony also featured a special video message from former President George W. Bush, who painted and profiled Roya Mahboob in his book *Out of Many One: Portraits of America’s Immigrants*. “I know the people of Afghanistan, and especially the women, are strong and determined, and Laura and I will always stand with them,” he said. Prior to the ceremony, Khalida Popal had the opportunity to attend a home game of the Washington Spirit, DC’s professional women’s soccer team. The Spirit recognized her important contribution to women’s soccer and women’s empowerment through sport by asking her to do the game coin toss and presenting her with an honorary team jersey. She was also able to visit with Afghan families recently resettled in the United States, who had been invited to attend the game.

Chelsea Hedquist

Lantos Foundation for Human Rights & Justice

+1 603-229-2017

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