

FIRST Afghan girls' story was among many at global robotics event

By Jessica Gresko
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An international robotics competition last month in Washington attracted teams of teenagers from more than 150 nations. The team that drew the most attention at the For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology (FIRST) Global Challenge was a squad of girls from Afghanistan who were twice rejected for U.S. visas before President Donald Trump intervened. But there were even more stories than there were teams. Here are a few:

Girl power

Sixty percent of the teams participating in the competition were founded, led, or organized by women. Of the 830 teens participating, 209 were girls. And there were six all-girl teams, including not only the Afghan squad, but also teams from the United States, Ghana, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, and the Pacific island nation of Vanuatu. Vanuatu's nickname: the "SMART Sistas."

Samira Bader, 16, on the Jordanian team, said "it's very difficult for us because everyone thinks" building robots is "only for boys." She said her team wants to prove "girls can do it."

The three-girl U.S. team included sisters Colleen and Katie Johnson of Everett, Washington, and Sanjna Ravichandar of Plainsboro, New Jersey. Colleen Johnson, 16, said her team looks forward "to a day when an all-girls team is going to be no more special than an all-boys team or a co-ed team, just when that's completely normal and accepted."

The team competing from Brunei was also all female, though a male member previously worked on the project.

An unusual alliance

The United States and Russia were on the same side. During the fourth round of the competition, the U.S. team was paired with teams from Russia and Sudan to work as an alliance.



The robots all the teams in the competition created were designed with the same kit of parts and perform the same task: pick up and distinguish between blue and orange balls. To score points, teams deposited the blue balls, which represented water, and the orange balls, which represented contaminants, into different locations. Each three-nation alliance competed head to head in two-and-a-half minute games.

Both U.S. and Russian teams complimented their counterparts after their game. Russian team member Aleksandr Iliasov said of the U.S. team: "They cooperate well." And U.S. team member Colleen Johnson called the Russian team's robot "very innovative," saying they had smartly used extra wheels and gears and zip ties to keep balls inside their robot.

Despite their good collaboration, U.S.-Russia-Sudan fell short, losing 40 to 20 to Zimbabwe, Moldova, and Trinidad and Tobago.

With a little help from my friends

The team from Iran got some help building their robot from American students. It turned out the competition's kit of robot parts that included wheels, brackets, sprockets, gears, pulleys, and

belts was not approved for shipment to Iran due to sanctions involving technology exports to the country. So the competition recruited a robotics team at George C. Marshall High School in Falls Church, Virginia, to help. Iran's team designed the robot, and about five Marshall students built it in the United States.

The team explained on its competition webpage that "our friends in Washington made our ideas as a robot."

Because of the time difference between the countries, the three-member team and its mentor were sometimes up at midnight or 3:00am in Iran to talk to their collaborators.

Amin Dadkhah, 15, called working with the American students "a good and exciting experience for both of us." Kirianna Baker, one of the U.S. students who built the robot, agreed. "Having a team across the world with a fresh set of eyes is very valuable," she said.

Team hope

A group of three refugees from Syria competed as team "Refugee," also known as team "Hope." All three fled Syria to Lebanon three years ago because of violence in their country.

Mohamad Nabih Alkhateeb, Amar

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES. Rodaba Noori, left, Somayeh Faruqi, Kawsar Rashan, and Lida Azizi, with Team Afghanistan, encourage their robot during the final round of competition, at the For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology (FIRST) Global Robotics Challenge, held in Washington, D.C. last month. The challenge is an international robotics event with teams competing from more than 100 countries. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

Kabour, and Maher Alisawui named their robot "Robogee," a combination of the words "robot" and "refugee."

Alkhateeb, 17, and Kabour, 16, say they want to be robotics engineers, and Alisawui wants to be a computer engineer. Kabour said it was important to the team to perform well to "tell the world" refugees are "here and they can do it."

Alkhateeb also said living as a refugee has been difficult, but he hopes to someday return home.

"I will go back after I have finished my education so I can rebuild Syria again," he said.

Some 11 million people — half the Syrian population — have been forced from their homes.

Results

Teams left with gold, silver, and bronze medals in a variety of categories.

The Europe team won a gold award for getting the most cumulative points over the course of the competition. Poland received silver and Armenia bronze. Finland won a gold award for winning the best win-loss record. Silver went to Singapore and bronze to India.

There were also awards for engineering design, innovation, and international unity, among others. The Afghanistan team won a silver medal for "courageous achievement." The award recognized teams that exhibited a "can-do" attitude even under difficult circumstances or when things didn't go as planned. The gold medal in that category went to the South Sudan team and bronze to the Oman team, whose students are deaf.

The 2018 competition will be held in Mexico City.

Supreme Court justice Gorsuch welcomes new citizens

By Sudhin Thanawala
The Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — A U.S. Supreme Court justice who was in favor of completely reinstating President Donald Trump's ban on travellers from six mostly Muslim countries welcomed new U.S. citizens in July, encouraging them to tolerate different points of view and respect people with whom they disagree.

"Democracy depends on our willingness to hear and respect even those we disagree with strongly," U.S. Supreme Court associate justice Neil Gorsuch told the citizens following a naturalization ceremony at the 9th Circuit's judicial conference. "In a government by and for the people, we have to remember those with whom we disagree, even vehemently, still have the best interests of the country at heart."

Gorsuch's visit came as the Trump administration asked the high court to again weigh in on its ban on travellers from six mostly Muslim countries. Gorsuch was among three justices who said in June that the ban should be completely reinstated pending arguments before the high court, and the justice could not escape discussion of the ban during his visit to the 9th Circuit conference.

With Gorsuch seated next to her, an Alaska high school student earlier in the day read her winning essay on Japanese internment — a topic selected by the 9th Circuit.

Olivia Tafs, 15, compared the treatment of Muslims after the September 11 attacks to that of Japanese Americans during World War II. She cited Trump's travel ban as an example of what she said was ethnic profiling.



Gorsuch shook her hand following the speech.

Gorsuch was a late fill-in at the 9th Circuit conference for Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, who cancelled his trip after his wife fractured her hip in Austria. The 9th Circuit — the nation's largest federal court circuit — includes the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and district and bankruptcy courts in California and eight other western states.

Judges in the circuit have blocked both of Trump's travel bans and halted his attempt to strip funding from so-called sanctuary cities.

Gorsuch's remarks come as the Trump administration asks the Supreme Court to again weigh in on its ban on travellers from Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Libya, Iran, and Yemen. Gorsuch joined justice Samuel Alito in a dissent written by Justice Clarence Thomas in June that said the ban, which also blocks refugees, should be completely reinstated pending arguments before the high court scheduled for October.

The dissent argued the administration had made a "strong showing" that it was likely to succeed in overturning court orders blocking the ban. The administration has argued the ban is needed for national security. Lower court judges have cited Trump's comments on the campaign trail as evidence that it was motivated by anti-Muslim bias.

AWKWARD EXCHANGE. Associate Supreme Court justice Neil Gorsuch, left, shakes hands with an attendee after speaking during a civics program showcase at the 9th Circuit's judicial conference in San Francisco, California. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, Pool)

The Supreme Court majority in June said the administration could mostly enforce its travel ban, but must exempt those "with a credible claim of a bona fide relationship with a person or entity in the United States."

U.S. District judge Derrick Watson in Hawai'i in July ordered the government to allow in refugees formally working with a resettlement agency in the U.S. His order also vastly expanded the list of U.S. family relationships that refugees and visitors from six Muslim-majority countries could use to get into the country, including grandparents and grandchildren. The ruling opened the door to entry for tens of thousands of refugees.

The administration appealed the ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court.

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Talking Story: How Tongan America speaks to us

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afternoon.

Outside another cool breeze, and then another, was arriving on that grand circular sweep of Pacific waves and weather that has brought Pacific islanders here then back there, over and over, longer than the longest memories of any of our grand aunts, Native, settled, and New Americans alike.

When asked by a *Hollywood Star* news reporter what's next, princess Mele Kavapalu answered, naturally: "Growing up, my family travelled throughout the west coast and across the Pacific Ocean and that travelling inspired me to become a pilot."

To learn more about Rose Festival princess Mele Kavapalu, please see Maileen Hamto's June 5, 2017 Asian Reporter story, located at <www.asianreporter.com/stories/local/2017/11-mele.htm>.

A 60-second video of the Filipina/Ethiopian/Tongan Rose Festival Court's "I Want You Back" is found online at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOd10rCbUwM>.



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