

Afghan refugee has dementia, but Denmark may push her out

COPENHAGEN

Government says it needs proof of illness; family says she has no one back home

BY MARTIN SELSOE SORENSEN

Zarmena Waziri once fought for women's rights in Afghanistan, but now, at age 72, she is a refugee in Denmark living with increasingly advanced dementia.

She could be deported next week.

Ms. Waziri's repeated requests for asylum since November 2012 have been denied by the Danish government, which this month rejected a new review of her case and told her to report to a deportation center June 4, next Tuesday.

Family members and advocates working on Ms. Waziri's behalf say she is a victim of Denmark's increasingly strict asylum policies. The number of refugees granted humanitarian asylum fell to just three in 2017, from 72 in 2012 and 223 in 2007.

Her daughter Marzia Waziri, who has

been her main caretaker and led the push to persuade the Danish authorities to let her stay, said deportation would amount to a death sentence.

"She's in bed 99 percent of the time," Marzia Waziri said in a phone interview from the city of Aarhus, where she lives in an apartment with her mother and runs a small grocery store. "She can't do anything."

Ms. Waziri's condition has worsened in the two years since The New York Times first reported on her case. Once able to walk around her daughter's apartment, she chokes because she forgets to swallow her food, wears a diaper and barely recognizes family members, her daughter said. In addition, she has suffered blood clots and is struggling with diabetes and asthma, Marzia Waziri said.

She said she would defy the order and refuse to deliver her mother to the deportation center. "We're not going there," she said. "They will have to come and get her."

Leif Randeris of Danish Immigrant Counseling, who is working on the case on the family's behalf, said the Ministry of Immigration and Integration had sent out 15 to 20 requests for more or updated

information in the current appeal, which was opened in 2016. Earlier this year, when the authorities made yet another request, Marzia Waziri said that she had reached her limit.

"They keep on and on and on every three months asking for new information," she said. "I don't want to mail more paper. It's been going on for two years, and I'm thinking of this every day. I can't gather more proof."

Inger Stojberg, the country's top immigration official, declined to comment on Ms. Waziri's case.

A key point in the final rejection is a lack of medical documentation for Zarmena Waziri's dementia. Her family has provided a 2016 psychologist's statement saying that she suffers from a "medium severe" state of dementia and that she is "a danger to herself" because of eating difficulties.

The Ministry of Immigration says that only a doctor's diagnosis is acceptable in cases of humanitarian asylum. As an asylum seeker, Ms. Waziri is not eligible for all Danish health services, so she must pay full price for a diagnosis by a doctor, which her daughter said would cost \$13,500 — money the family does not have.



ANDREW TESTA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Zarmena Waziri, 72, with her daughter Marzia, center, and a granddaughter in Denmark. Marzia Waziri plans to defy an order to deliver her mother to a deportation center.

The Red Cross provides health facilities for asylum seekers but does not cover treatment or assessment beyond basic or acute needs, said Eva Singer, the asylum director of the Danish Refu-

gee Council, a nongovernmental organization. Ms. Singer said some refugees were able to find doctors who did a free diagnosis.

Another point of contention is

whether Zarmena Waziri has anyone in Afghanistan to take care of her, which could be grounds for rejection of asylum. Her siblings and children are either dead or have moved abroad, and she has no social network in Afghanistan, her daughter says.

But the ministry disagrees: There is a nephew on her deceased husband's side. The family is not in touch with him and says he is a member of the Taliban, which opposes the feminist ideals Zarmena Waziri promoted half a century ago.

It makes the nephew a most unlikely caretaker, but that is not relevant to the case, the Immigration Ministry wrote in its final decision. It considers only the cousin's "ability" to take care of his relative, not his "willingness," the ministry said.

The years of fighting both her mother's diseases and the tightening rules and bureaucracy have taken their toll on Marzia Waziri, she said. She has started to hope for a painless solution to her mother's misery.

"It's a bit evil, perhaps, but I hope she dies before June 4, because then she can have some peace," she said. "I'm sorry, but I'm powerless."