Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 11, 2017

The Honorable Rex W. Tillerson
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson,

We are alarmed by recent media reports that your Department chose to deny visas to six Afghan girls traveling to the United States for FIRST Global, an international robotics challenge to be held in Washington beginning July 16. We urge you to reconsider their visa applications - while security concerns should always be a primary consideration in visa issuance, it is hard to believe these young women present sufficient risk to prevent their temporary visit to the United States. This team of high school students has spent months developing a ball-sorting robot to present at this global challenge, and they braved a high-risk journey from their homes in Herat to attend visa interviews at the United States Embassy in Kabul earlier this year.

Barring these hardworking, creative young women from a competition premised on global connection and innovation runs counter to the State Department's mission of fostering security and stability through peace. The work of diplomacy is not limited to embassies and consulates; the United States engages with individuals abroad precisely because these individual relationships are the key to stability and development. Indeed, as the world's leader of scientific innovation and research, inviting the world's best and brightest to support our research efforts enhances our ability to expand knowledge in all fields, whether robotics or medicine, art or engineering, mathematics or history. In particular, supporting women's education initiatives has been a vital component of our diplomacy and has been proven to enhance stability and speed development more than almost any policy focus.

One of the most important accomplishments of our participation with NATO's effort to oust Taliban control of Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 was to end the Taliban's disenfranchisement of women and the ban on education of young girls. Those of us in Congress who have traveled to that country saw with our own eyes young girls going to school, which never would have been possible without the heroic sacrifice of our military. This order shutting the door on these young women, contradicts that hard fought change to create a fairer, more democratic society.

As our military leaders know and have said numerous times, vigorous diplomacy complements and strengthens our military efforts around the world – including our longstanding operations in Afghanistan. Save for a legitimate security threat, we urge you in the strongest terms to reverse this decision and welcome these young women to the United States.

Sincerely,

Joe Courtney
Member of Congress

Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress

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