

geraniums. The oils are exported to Canada, South Africa, the US and elsewhere for use in the

yield, Mumbani says, noting that it takes between 600-1,000kg of geraniums to produce a single

STOCK MARKET
According to the India-based firm Market Research Future (MRFR),

Afghan girls compete at robotics meet after US visa woes

UNITED STATES
Washington DC

Huddled around a small table in the halls of a cavernous Washington concert hall, a group of Afghan teenage girls tweak gears and sprockets on their radio-controlled robot, hoping to best the competition.

But the six proud nerds from war-torn Afghanistan's western province of Herat almost did not make it to the US capital for the chance to battle other high school students from around the world.

Twice denied US visas until a late intervention by President Donald Trump's administration, they are now

hoping to set an example for girls in their ultra-conservative country.

Even in a venue crowded with hundreds of teens, the Afghans were difficult to miss on Monday in their bright blue T-shirts paired with white hijabs — and trailed wherever they go by a throng of journalists.

"Robotics is a field that is part of my life. I am so happy to be here and participate against the other teams," 15-year-old Lida Azizi told AFP, adding she was a "bit nervous" about taking part in her first competition.

The plight of the Afghan team had made headlines around the world after it appeared

BETWEEN THE LINES:

■ The girls were twice denied US visas until a late intervention by President Donald Trump's administration.

to underscore the negative consequences of stricter visa policies for Muslim countries under Trump.

The US leader recently succeeded in passing a limited version of a long-touted travel ban — temporarily barring visitors from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen without a "bona fide" US connection and all refugees

— pending a hearing by the Supreme Court.

Afghanistan was not on the list, but critics contended the frequency of such refusals undermined the administration's pledge to empower women. A team from Gambia was also temporarily barred.

Eventually, however, all 163 teams — including those from Iran, Sudan and a team of Syrian refugees — were granted visas.

Unique challenges

On Monday, teams from around the world jostled into Washington's historic DAR Constitution Hall, excited

to test their skills on laser-lit stages as a sportscaster provided live commentary.

Between rounds, some traded tips and tricks on modifications to make the most of their kit-built devices.

The competition tests multiple skill sets — programming the machines, adjusting the hardware to manoeuvre more efficiently, and dexterity in controlling the devices while under time pressure.

Alireza Mehraban, the Afghan team "mentor", explained his team was selected from a tough school competition featuring 150 students. The group was cut to a shortlist of 20 before the final six were picked.

And unlike their counterparts from wealthier countries, Afghans had unique problems they had to contend with, such as a lack of some lab equipment.

"We up-cycled material and used trash," said Mehraban, explaining how the team created a simple suction device using a Coca-Cola bottle.

They also lacked material preparation, added Momen Mahboob, an Afghan team entrepreneur who helped organise the visit.

"When they built their robots they had to ship it straight to the US so they did not have the opportunity to really play and practice."