



Russia and Ukraine swap prisoners to ease tensions

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KABUL: In this photograph taken on August 29, 2019, Afghan co-founder and president of ArtLords Omaid Sharifi, 32, speaks during an interview with AFP at his studio. — AFP

Young Afghans pen 'letters of pain'

Finding freedom by sharing their passions and emotions in written form

KABUL: Omaid Sharifi, who heads a Kabul-based art collective, sits in his studio and leafs through a stack of dozens of hand-written letters, reading out sentences at random. A line in one missive, written in Dari and spelled out in huge letters, states simply: "We want peace," Sharifi says. "By peace, they just mean a ceasefire, just stop this nonsense violence," he explains. The letters are the fruit of a recent initiative by ArtLords, a not-for-profit group that Sharifi co-founded and runs, which aims to give a voice to young Afghans who feel ignored and powerless as the war rages on.

In a pilot project in Kabul, where more than 30 people were killed by blasts in the past week, ArtLords is building on the Afghan tradition of penning "dard-e-dil" — letters of pain. The scheme allows people living in an ultra-conservative society to find freedom by sharing their passions and emotions in written form. Sharifi and his team have placed six large wooden letter boxes — painted white and decorated with love hearts

— in high schools, universities and cafes around the Afghan capital and invited people to share their stories.

"Whenever you want to share your deep thoughts, you write letters," Sharifi says. "So we asked the youngsters to write letters about their fears, about their solutions, about their hopes." Within the first two weeks of the project, they had more than 300 letters, Sharifi says. He reads from another, this one addressed to the Kabul government. "We are in a very bad situation," he quotes. "We need your attention because every single day we are dying from the fear of explosions and the fear that I might die today — in the car, in the office, in the university..." He says nowhere is safe.

Angry and ignored

The project launched a few weeks ago, just as talks between the US and the Taliban seemed to be entering their final stages. They are working on a deal that would see the Pentagon pull about 5,000 troops from Afghanistan by early next year, in return for various

security guarantees from the insurgents. But so far, the negotiations have all but excluded the Afghan government, and many Afghans — particularly educated young people in urban cores — feel angry and ignored.

The US says it is up to the Kabul government and Afghan society at large to forge an eventual peace deal with the Taliban that protects basic freedoms. But many fear a jaded America is selling out their interests in its bid to quit Afghanistan after 18 years of grinding and costly war. The young letter writers want "an inclusive peace process that takes into consideration all realities of Afghanistan," Sharifi told AFP at ArtLords' colourful base in Kabul, where artworks cover the walls and where anyone can walk in and paint a picture.

The 32-year-old artist is well known around Kabul and across Afghanistan thanks to ArtLords' prolific output, which centers mainly on the painting of huge murals on the capital's labyrinth of blast walls that divide the city into militarized ghettos. The latest mural

project ArtLords has undertaken is to paint one red tulip for each and every Afghan civilian killed in the war — some 35,000 in all since 2001.

Each "one of these tulips is a story of someone," Sharifi said. Many of the flowers will be painted at the scene of the explosion or attack that claimed an innocent life. Sharifi hopes to expand the letter-writing campaign across Afghanistan. He said the contents of all the letters would be shared with President Ashraf Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, the US and even the Taliban. "I know that the president has read all of the letters ... and he is aware of what the young ones are expecting of him in that whole peace process," Sharifi said. One of the letter boxes has been placed in a hip new cafe in Kabul, where young Afghans sip lattes and read books. "Afghan people are not very optimistic about this peace process because we do not know anything about the agreement," said one customer who gave her name only as Nargis. "For us the future is unclear." — AFP

In Arab Spring cradle, Tunisian youth dream of 'real leader'

SIDI BOUZID: As Tunisia prepares for presidential elections, young people in the city that was the cradle of the Arab Spring are disenchanted, saying the dreams of the revolution have been "dashed". "As long as we don't have a real leader that loves their country, we will not vote!" said Issam Heni, 34, determined to boycott the polls set for September 15.

The election was brought forward from November after the death in July of Beji Caid Essebsi, Tunisia's first president democratically elected in nationwide polls after the fall of longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. It was in the central Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid that a young street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself alight in December 2010 in protest over unemployment and police harassment.

His action sparked demonstrations that swept across the Arab world. Tunisia has since been praised as a rare success story for democratic transition after the uprisings. Yet while the first post-revolution elections in 2011 saw unprecedented participation, years later many residents, including those who were adolescents in 2011, are disillusioned. Major investments have breathed new life into Sidi Bouzid. But despite bright new infrastructure and a swimming pool, insecurity and unemployment exceeding 18 percent locally gnaw at young people's aspirations, while seven percent inflation batters already weakened purchasing power.

Dashed dreams

The interior of the country, traditionally less well

off than the coast, remains isolated, fuelling regular outbreaks of social unrest. While Heni voted in national polls in 2011 and in 2014, as well as the 2018 municipal elections, this time around he is more apathetic.

"The elections have become one of many events that don't concern me," he said, sitting in a cafe full of idle young people. "They want power and only power. Nothing more, nothing less," added Nadhmi, who is unemployed and in his 30s. He said he is often overwhelmed by financial difficulties.

"The dreams of the revolution and hopes of improving living conditions for Tunisians were dashed by mismanagement by a mafia political class," he said. Several residents told AFP they wanted a "strong" and "responsible" president like Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan. "When we have a candidate like the Turkish president, we will vote without fail," said Zied, 29, who has a degree in English and has been unemployed for five years. In 2014, Sidi Bouzid residents came out to support one of their own, conservative businessman Hechmi Hamdi, in the first round of the presidential election. Hamdi is running again, but this time with little traction.

'Trivial'

For some, the strongman they are looking for is embodied by controversial media mogul Nabil Karoui, a popular candidate now in prison on charges of money laundering. "I don't care if he is a thief or a bandit, the bottom line is that he is the only one working to help people like me," said Abir, 19, bent pulling onions in a vast field along the road to Sidi Bouzid. For Abir, the 56-year-old who built a reputation publicizing his charity campaigns "could save the poor in this country".

But some of the dozen other women working with Abir under the blazing sun disagree. "These elections are trivial. Nothing but the work we do with our own hands, now and like always, puts food on the table. No one will concern themselves with us," a woman called Fatma said. The president "does nothing but make the



SIDI BOUZID: Tunisian youths walk past a branch of the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) on August 15, 2019 in the central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, which nine years ago saw the start of the Arab Spring movements that brought down multiple autocrats in the Arab world. — AFP

rich richer and the poor poorer."

Nabil Jalleli, coordinator of the regional office of the Independent Higher Authority for Elections poll body in Sidi Bouzid, understands the strong temptation to abstain "especially on the part of the youth". Abstentions reached 65 percent for the 2018 municipal elections. For him, this is explained in part by "the political climate" and insufficient "services provided

by the political class to benefit young people".

Despite its democratic progress, Tunisia is struggling to meet the expectations of its population. Public services are inadequate and prospects limited for many young people, leading some to try to reach Europe to find a better future. But Haythem, a laundry worker in his 30s, refused to give in to defeatism. "We must vote so our country recovers," he said. — AFP