

VOICES

FOR CREATIVE NONVIOLENCE

November 2020 – Final Issue

Dear Friends,

We are writing this cover letter with true appreciation for all who read it.

For 25 years, recipients of our newsletters have participated in numerous Voices delegations, fasts, vigils, walks, presentations and other events. You have generously shared resources, enabling our work. Since Voices in the Wilderness was founded, in 1995, we've been fortunate to struggle, learn, and grow with an endless list of extraordinary individuals and like-minded groups. We're very grateful for so many years of helpful guidance and collaboration.

Our appreciation however, is tinged with anxiety and sadness as we are writing here to say Voices for Creative Nonviolence, as a campaign, is ending. This will be our last newsletter. We'll archive our website and close our operation at the end of 2020. Yet, we'll surely look forward to continuing our activism. Our efforts to resist wars and to build peace will continue, but in a modified form.

Why did we decide to close VCNV?

During this time of pandemic, we've learned to craft new means of outreach and activism. We haven't been able to form delegations, organize walks and lengthy vigils, or travel as itinerant educators to various communities as we have in the past. Greater involvement in local activism has been a plus for our Chicago crew.

Zoom and Skype gatherings have thankfully enabled us to stay in touch with colleagues and respond to speaking invitations, but we recognize reality has now shifted.

We're no longer able to visit our friends in Afghanistan and elsewhere in person. This greatly changes our ability to support and learn from them and their projects as we were previously able to do (In this newsletter, we're featuring a fine article Sarah Ball wrote about her experiences when she visited Kabul).

We recognize organizations must adapt and change in response to changing circumstances. Please see page 7 of this newsletter for important notes from the small committee which has been overseeing closure of Voices for Creative Nonviolence.

We expect and look forward to a new collective, one which will strive to meet the challenges of the times and current realities. More information will be provided on this in a separate writing in the near future. For now, we ask you to accept our sincere thanks for all you've done to maintain Voices for Creative Nonviolence. Dag Hammarskjöld's words come to mind: "For all that has been, thank you. For all that will be, yes!"

Kathy Kelly, writing on behalf of the *Committee to Oversee
Closure of Voices for Creative Nonviolence*: Sean Reynolds,
Sarah Ball, Ken Hannaford-Ricardi, Kathy Kelly, and Bob Alberts

We're grateful to feature Sarah Ball's account of her visits in Bamiyan and Kabul with friends and Afghan Peace Volunteers. Her "Afghanistan Diary" exemplifies the fine and rewarding experiences which many at VCNV have been fortunate to share. Photos are by Abdulhai, who first welcomed VCNV members to Bamiyan in 2010. Sarah notes: some names below have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Afghanistan Diary

by Sarah Ball

Afghanistan returns to me through Nagiba's room. She is on the roof of the kitchen across the courtyard; I can see her through the window. She is gathering sticks to light the samovar for boiling that day's water. She will pour it into thermoses and hour by hour they will populate the rooms of the house - Nagiba's, her sister's, and the kitchen. The potato cellar, the common garden - with three chickens threading through it - and the rooms of two other families fill out the space. A communal washline drapes across the lot, and if you walk up the roof of the cellar all Bamiyan spreads before you.

I am sitting on one of the cushions surrounding the walls of her room, reading a how-to permaculture guide. Nagiba keeps her spaces clean and quiet, the walls bright white and dotted with calendar cut-outs and photos of her favorite things, all of the gifts of nature, her brother holding a sheep and smiling into the camera, rivers running over Australian stones, nettles and clouds and fields of blooms, in Afghanistan and around the world. There is an aloe plant on the windowsill. These quiet pickings feel like icons. Life should be hedged with the pleasures it gives.

I will lie on my stomach, on my back, sitting cross-legged, on cushions and with the permaculture book, and always in Nagiba's room, for so much of the trip it seems. In Afghanistan - in Bamiyan - a place where so many of the men were killed by the Taliban in 2001, a place that the US bombed in response, where the people fled to mountain caves until they could return without meeting death and where, Nagiba said,

she had recently noticed that people were beginning to seem happy again. I read about what trees ward off forest fires, about grey water, how to get your chickens to fertilize the garden, and what indigenous villages look like around the world. I learn that anyone can practice permaculture simply by thinking about how they live now, right now, at this moment. I reflect that permaculture is like love, or nonviolence, in this way. Even I could do it, maybe... And the door opens and Nagiba nudges through with a tea and breakfast tray and her gracious and almost complicit smile.

We unroll the mat and spread it with the bread, the cream cheese, the thermos of tea, two glasses, a spoon and a glass jar of sugar. Khadija and Shirin will join us after their classes and we will talk and talk. We will sprawl about Nagiba's room on backs and stomachs fingering through books, gossiping - they catch me up in English every five or ten minutes and I get a tidbit - doing personality quizzes, telling stories, until the voices crescendo and the speed accumulates and bursts into laughter. There must be

photos from those three days somewhere of us with sexy librarian glasses, freckles, cat ears, French mustaches.

Hussin is encharged with hosting Kathy and me at the Afghan Peace Volunteers' house in Kabul. It is dusk and excepting our two other protectors, Khalil and Qamber, the other young men and women

who have sat with us off and on that day in the main room to find a spot of cushion, a laptop, a bit of the pleasantly continuous, informal conversation and maybe some tea or boiled water, have vanished into the streets and returned home. I reverse the game I play back in Chicago trying to glimpse a stretch of Lake Shore drive or the Argyle and Broadway intersection as the empty, busy but expressionless place a stranger would see; I strain myself imagining the whirling streets outside the walled courtyard built up street kid by bicycle by student by hijab by bread shop by fruit cart to reveal nothing more than the easy-on-the-eyes, ignorable because comprehensible, aspect of one's own body, or front door. I wish I could accompany them. But this evening Kathy and I are settling into our nest for the night, and Hussin



comes through the courtyard gate towards dusk to meet us, smiling, gracious, a bit tense. We sit under the fig tree in plastic chairs and Hussin settles back into his with the twinned languor and restiveness of a very young man. He is winning – he is charming and he knows it – and his solicitude, watchful smiles and careful attention now and then drift into and out of a brief gloom or distraction. What do we want for dinner? He insists we choose what we like – spinach and that tasty rice with raisins and bits of carrot – and sends Khalil out to get it. Then he tells us about himself.

Hussin's home is in Maidan Wardak, a largely Pashtun province bordering Kabul and in many places controlled by the Taliban. Everyone owns weapons, he says, and even his mother is now ready to buy. When Hussin was growing up the fighting in Wardak was mostly between the Taliban and the Islamic Party, and, the Taliban winning, the remaining Islamic party leaders largely withdrew. But the fighting simply shifted, and continues today between the Taliban and the Afghan government forces. Hussin's village is patrolled by a few Afghan soldiers, but the Taliban control it and there is no escaping them – they have entered his family's house demanding food, tea, and accommodation. They have stopped him after catching sight of his stylish, modern and thus frowned upon, haircut and asked to see a university ID card. They've money-or-your-life'd him in a dispute over a motorcycle lamp. Hussin and his friends have learned to be circumspect; the possession of a university ID card means death. All major roads between Kabul and Wardak have been mined with IEDs. The US and NATO have been retaliating, yes – to the extent that the people in Wardak now say that US/NATO forces kill the people, and not the Taliban. More young men join the Taliban each year, and, in a country with a 40 percent unemployment rate, they are given a gun and a motorcycle when they join. The Taliban, Hussin says, were strict with crime in the beginning. And in the chaos of the early 2000s they were often the only stabilizing force, but now, the Taliban are 'not homogenous at all. Just regular people.' Anyone can be a Talib – your father, your brother – and there is no longer any code of honor holding them together. A walk from one side of your village to the next could mean death, on any day. Throw into that US drone attacks and air strikes by the CIA-backed Afghan forces and your chances become lower still. The most recent report by Human Rights Watch showed that 41 percent of civilian casualties were women and children.

So merely for practicality Hussin and his mother have been debating whether to buy a gun – what use would another weapon be but for more death? Could they skip on the bullets and buy one just to brandish? They have no interest in killing anyone. But what do you do? All of the current candidates for the Afghan presidency are warlords, except for the ex-World Bank and US cherry-picked candidate, Ashraf Ghani. Everyone feels the country is at the threshold of civil war. For years Hussin's friends have died around him. Most recently, he tells us, a friend was moving to another province with his family, his youngest child two years old. All six in the party were killed on the road by an IED. Hussin seems tense and besieged, and tells us that evening offhandedly that he is depressed. He's been working with the People's Peace Movement in Helmand and starting an Abolish War team with the Afghan Peace Volunteers, but these projects do nothing to further his personal safety. Rather the reverse. Hussin, with a resigned smile, tells us that he will be catching a bus back to Wardak in the next few weeks. His sister is getting married and there can be no thought of missing the wedding.

Nagiba, Khadija, Shirin and I have rustled up the money for a ride to Band-e Amir. The cab picks up Ziya along the way and after picking up apples, eggs, tomatoes and bread for a picnic, Shirin passes around gum, Nagiba tells me that the road to Band-e Amir is safe, and we take off. I do not know why this particular road is safe. Perhaps because Band-e Amir is a national park and popular vacation spot, even for Afghan big-wigs? Or because the Japanese have been financing the road's construction? The Japanese have maintained diplomatic relations with Afghanistan since 1931, and have recently financed restoration of the Buddhas of Bamiyan after their 2001 destruction by the Taliban. Small bronze-colored placards attesting Japan's fidelity to the people of Afghanistan appear in incongruous places throughout the day. Whatever the case may be, it's true, the road is not only safe but excellent. Which is however meaningless to most of the poor living in the villages abutting the road.

It is pleasant, and glorious, for an American from Chicago to circle Bamiyan as the plane descends, and see the city bloom out of tree-lined avenues enclosing variegated fields below. As you get closer you will see the men and women tending the fields, and after you land, cows nosing up to the airport. Patches of flowers are everywhere and the hills shine down from above, crowned with ancient cities. It is a paradise. Snow tops the mountains behind the hills. But every

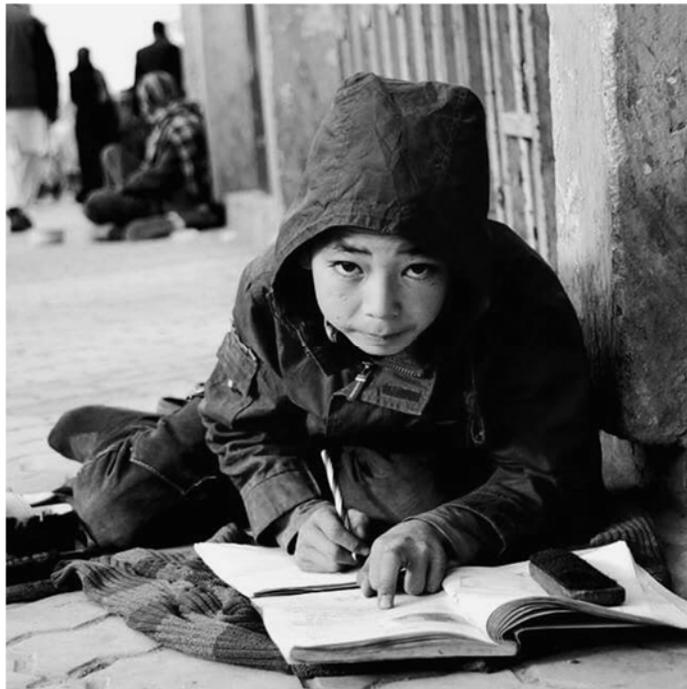
year there is less snow, and the river running through the center of town has narrowed to the point that it cuts a ditch in the side of the river bed. Herds of goats amble alongside idyllic plots, often with a small boy cutting a figure behind, but the plots are too small to sustain their tenders. The quaint caves spotting the hills are not so quaint to much of the population, who fled to them when the Taliban arrived in 2001 with the intention of killing every male. Entire families lived out of a hole in the ground for weeks, to return to a city razed by the counterattack of the United States.

So it was also en route to Band-e Amir. The wheat fields, the herds of sheep, the lines of wash hung between the mud houses at the sides of the hills. Shirin had a stash of qurut, hard balls of sheep cheese shaped like a top that you cracked with your teeth to open. Munching them, we sped by the villages that fashioned these every year. In the spring the villagers would drive their sheep herds to the valleys outlying Band-e Amir to prepare the cheese. What did these people do, I wonder, when the Taliban, followed by the US and NATO, turned this area into a war zone?

It was strange, in the middle of Afghanistan, feeling as giddy as I ever have. A spontaneous road trip, packing into a tiny car, giggling, scrambling up a hill to poke about in an ancient cave, snacking and falling asleep mid-route, yelling at the driver to pull over at a summit and scrambling out to scream over the cliff into the wind – none of these things were new! Shirin was Jo March, running up the trail edging the waters of Band-e Amir to perch herself thirty feet over the water with everyone else nervously watching their steps behind, or leaping through a waterfall mocking us all her with her eyes. Khadija was the wry accomplice who would unexpectedly launch into twenty minutes of animated monologue, or film herself with her phone conducting a mock television interview introducing the sights. Khadija wrote out her favorite patriotic poems for me in Dari – ‘I do not want to see you [Afghanistan] in sadness/ If I see you in sadness, my hands will fail me.’ Ziya, who had connections and carried us trays of eggs with tomato

and garlic from a tourist motel as we returned from the lake, the always agreeable instigator and prime mover, friends with everyone, laughing and curious. Nagiba, thoughtfully stepping behind, unfailingly loving, hesitant, holding the weight of her country’s suffering.

There was top brass in Band-e Amir that day. American sunglasses and ‘authentic’ souvenir hats, a swank jacket or shining boots, loud voices, scarves. Shirin, Khadija, and Ziya plotted: we did not have the money for a pedal boat so with a mixture of hilarity and bravura they approached these shining few and explained that we were all poor students from Bamiyan and could they buy us a fifteen-minute ride? I hung back with Nagiba, eyeing their progress. The top brass were delighted, and beneficent, and Nagiba



frowned, pensive, tentative, humble. ‘I don’t like those people,’ she said quietly. The jackals of Afghanistan were exposed to view, unredeemed. These men, flunkies of Ashraf Ghani, brown-nosers to the US, NATO, and the World Bank, whose hands the money ran through only to stop somewhere mysteriously before reaching Nagiba, Khadija, women selling tomatoes in the bazaar, the small boys riding donkeys, or anyone else

of real consequence. This government, hand-picked by the US without any thought for the people... should we consort with them? This was Nagiba’s dilemma. Nagiba is not confrontational, and we got our pedal boat. Maybe it was fitting that we should squeeze fifteen minute’s pleasure out of these men.

In Kabul we are debating. Refugees are pouring from every province over the tops of the mountains and popping the seams of the refugee camps. The city, built for 700,000, is now at 4.6 million. Plastic is burnt in lieu of wood in the winter (and it snows in Kabul). The poorest occupy mountain ledges peering down on the city, far from food and especially water, which is now a luxury even for the moderately well off. I ask to take a shower – more of a trickle for a sponge bath – am kindly welcomed to, and immediately regret it. I, the international, demand

morning freshness. My freshness shames me for the rest of the day.

Peoples who lived peaceably prior to the endless war, who were gradually habituated to suspicion, now have to rub shoulders once more, fleeing from drone attacks, suicide bombings, and the Taliban. Inevitably they converge on Kabul. The Hazara, say the Pashtun, are descendants of Genghis Khan and not true Afghans. The Pashtun, say the Hazara, are Talib, killers and brutes. Many of the young men and women at the Afghan Peace Volunteers had their first encounter with The Other here, at a debate, or just sitting around the garden under the fig tree. Mahdi, a mentor to the Afghan Peace Volunteers, started this project a decade ago with the help of Afghan youth in Bamiyan Provincial Centre: he invited young people of every ethnic group to meet with one another and talk. Those brave enough to attend were bewildered to find that the Pashtun, Hazara, Tajik, or whoever else they had been afraid of, were just like them. Even now some still have to volunteer secretly, catching a taxi or walking across the city saying they're out to 'do an errand' to placate their parents. Even Afghans 'forget all about the library/ like she told her old man, now.' In a marvelous coup, these young people meet to discuss the causes of their antagonism. Politics, religion, and money.

I ask Mahdi about the apparent disjunction between the warmth and courtesy of the Volunteers and the endless trials that so frequently surface in the discussions. Nearly everyone is a refugee from another province and has lost family and friends. On top of this, after unexpectedly finding themselves teaching school to the street kids or organizing poor women in Kabul in the duvet making cooperative, so many know they have only one or two years before being married to someone they have never met. Especially for Afghan women, this means the cessation of all previous activities. But the warmth is explicit and generous: when I landed in Kabul several hours late and wandered out into the airport's 'kiss and ride,' not knowing who would pick me up or who might have waited around an hour or two and left, a young man in a kaftan walked right up to me and asked if I needed to use his phone, which I did. Afterwards we exchanged pleasantries in an English/Dari mishmash and he walked back to his own preoccupations. It was like flying into Baltimore.

Mahdi told me of the anxiety and depression he saw in every young Afghan, underlying every conversation, and every relationship. I remembered the sudden pensiveness across the face of Nagiba, the

inattention and the admission of gloom from Hussin, and Salina's abrupt departure from a discussion about relations between the sexes. More people were joining the army - 10,000 Afghans (132 USD) per month was irresistible when a teacher made only 7,000. The Taliban was slowly encroaching, leaving Kabul, of all places, a comparative oasis. And the civilian casualties – in September the United Nations Assistance Movement in Afghanistan released a report showing that the last few months measured “marked the highest number of civilian casualties in a single quarter since the mission began documentation.” Warlords were vying for the presidency, gathering their own ethnic groups and preparing for civil war. Through it all the US continued to bomb, as the money continued to be squandered.

Still, we continued our discussions in the front room of the Volunteers' cooperative, crosslegged on cushions, flanking a thermos of green tea. Afterwards everyone wandered into the courtyard under the dusty fig tree. Pashtun and Hazara, men and women. A little ethnic ribbing, a little flirting, a lot of bravado - young people being irrepressible. I let them to their antics and settled back in my thoughts, but after a while heard someone calling me. A young man I hadn't noticed before was sitting a few heads away and wanted to introduce himself. His name was Mohammad. Somehow we ended up talking about books. Did he like Dickens? Did I like Jules Verne? Had we both read Tolstoy? We peered over the gigglers and shouters and shouted in turn about English literature and Iranian and Afghan poetry. These conversations have a way of springing up unassisted like weeds, organic and inevitable, wherever you are in the world.

Nagiba had several brothers who had been with the Volunteers for years. She'd been in it for years herself. But like so many other young women she was back in her home town, living in her family's house some forty minutes' drive from the village where she grew up. She wasn't sure what she wanted to do – something! Mahdi liked to say that it takes three years for conversion – to nonviolence, the idea of equality, or to lasting belief in any kind of different life. But even three years is a short time to change the hearts of young people who, out of necessity, end up in the same village with the same obligations and the same nudges toward marriage and a life that won't shame the family. So, in Bamiyan, Nagiba was on her own again after leading the peace brigade in the hustle of Kabul. A single woman living and working on her own is an impossibility in

Bamiyan, for now. Despite Nagiba's interest in permaculture, owning part of the family farm was for her brothers alone. She could not start a cooperative with friends. She could not give speeches at the university, and she had to be careful not to startle the community - gossip could be damaging, or even fatal. Not even the internet worked, most of the time.

But Nagiba believes in things. Nonviolence is for everyone, and for right now, pertinent, necessary, practical. Living in Bamiyan, or even visiting Fouladi, the village where her mother and brothers run a small farm, shouldn't be a hindrance. Nagiba tells me that in many Afghan villages women do not have 'friends' - they associate with family, especially the nuclear family living within the enclosed, mud-walled courtyard. In more traditional villages, often those run by the Taliban, women never step beyond these walls. In Fouladi this was not the case. Families would mingle, plan together for weddings, drive out to help with the potato harvest, and someone, Nagiba maybe, might stay in the kitchen cooking for everyone. Still, the women had no one to talk to. Nagiba suited up, and after a while had a group of fourteen women, from their early twenties to forty-eight, to offer one another support. Nagiba encouraged them to make the rules, and although they were at first shy and hesitant, she says they quickly got excited.

They agreed to meet each week, and contribute 10

Afghanis (0.13 USD) at each meeting. If a woman had trouble with the money one week, she should try to bring it the next. If she could not make a meeting, she should try to send her money through a friend. Be honest, the women said. If there is a problem with the funds, say so! Nagiba was worried that it would be difficult for the women to come up with the money, but somehow, most did. Some asked their husbands, some sold a few eggs on the side. The money was accumulated and kept for times of need: if someone had an illness, any sort of problem, or a plan for herself, she could take from the fund. Each week the women would meet in a different member's house and drink tea to discuss whatever they wished. Nagiba told me that she had asked the women what they wanted their group to be called. They took this very seriously, and after debating for some time, said that they would call it 'kharaba.' Zarghuna looked at me and laughed, and said that she had been surprised - it was a strange word. It meant a place where someone had lived before, but had left, or more simply, 'a place where nobody lives.'

Sarah Ball (sarah.ball7@gmail.com) is a Chicago activist and psychiatric nurse and has visited both Afghanistan and Iran as co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Nonviolence.



Forward From Here

A committee of Voices activists made up of Sean Reynolds, Sarah Ball, Ken Hannaford-Ricardi, Kathy Kelly, and Bob Alberts met weekly over the past several months to plan the closure of Voices for Creative Nonviolence. The committee wishes you to know these important details:

Voices for Creative Nonviolence UK

(www.vcnv.org.uk) is *not* closing and will continue its work ably led by Maya Evans.

The Afghan Peace Volunteers

(ourjourneytosmile.com) and the **Global Days of Listening** (globaldaysoflistening.org) will welcome ongoing communication and solidarity.

We at Voices U.S. will be archiving our website, and closing our bank account, in early 2021. We again thank all who have so generously supported us. You'll note there is no envelope enclosed in this newsletter. We pledge to return-to-sender any checks we receive after November 10th. All of the money in our account will be disbursed.

- Any funds designated for the **Afghan Peace Volunteers** will be sent to them, and we hope to assist their budget requests for the Afghan calendar year which runs from March 2020 – March 2021.

We will also make, and additionally encourage, donations to:

- **Voices for Creative Nonviolence UK** (www.vcnv.org.uk)
- **Jesuit Refugee Services projects in Kabul** (1627 K St NW Ste 1100, Washington, DC 20006). Voices members have regularly visited JRS projects, including education efforts, within a particular refugee camp, and have known of JRS' admirable work in Kabul since our first visit in 2010. *Checks can be sent payable to Jesuit Refugee Services, with "Kabul projects" written in the memo section and/or with an accompanying note designating that the contribution is for JRS' projects in Kabul.*

- **Emergency Surgical Center for Victims of War, Afghanistan** (<https://en.emergency.it/projects/afghanistan-kabul-surgical-centre/>). Voices members have regularly visited their hospital in Kabul since our first visit to Afghanistan in 2009. *Donations can be made through Emergency's website.*
- **Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Fund** (<https://yemenfoundation.org/>) *Donations can be made through the website or checks can be made payable to: Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation (YRRF) and mailed to: 3216 74th Place SE, Mercer Island, WA 98040*

Over the years, we have collaborated with several other organizations whose work we also plan to support with contributions. These include:

- **World Beyond War** (worldbeyondwar.org)
- **Witness Against Torture** (witnessagainsttorture.com)
- **the Nuclear Resister** (nukeresister.org) and
- **the Kings Bay Plowshares 7** (kingsbayplowshares7.org)

We thank you for your support for all these years. **You haven't heard the last from any of us**, and we'll vigorously continue our activism post-Voices, both as individuals and as each other's persistently dear friends.

So that we can keep you apprised of our future efforts, we ask you to please **take a moment now** to phone / email us (info@vcnv.org 773-865-6042) making sure we have your **most current contact information**, with a special focus on current email addresses and *backup* email addresses so we'll stay in contact. In any case, we'd love to hear from you.

Of the resources that went into making Voices work, **your commitment to peace** was always the most essential. We earnestly look forward as your friends and fellow activists to striving alongside you in the years ahead.

VOICES

FOR CREATIVE NONVIOLENCE

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WORLD SAYS
NO WAR
ON YEMEN

NO WAR ON YEMEN: PROTEST INTERNATIONALLY JANUARY 25, 2021

Since 2015, the Saudi-led bombing and blockade of Yemen has killed tens of thousands of people and devastated the country. The U.N. calls this the **largest humanitarian crisis on Earth**. Half the country's people are on the brink of famine, the country has the world's worst cholera outbreak in modern history, and now Yemen has one of the very worst COVID death rates in the world: **COVID kills 1 in 4 Yemenis it infects**.

The disaster in Yemen is man-made. It is caused by the war and blockade. It can be ended. People and organizations from the U.S., Britain, Canada, France, Italy, and across the world, are coming together to call for an end to the war in Yemen and solidarity with the people of Yemen. We demand that right now our governments:

- **Stop** foreign aggression on Yemen.
- **Stop** weapons and war support for Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
- **Lift** the blockade on Yemen and open all land and sea ports.
- **Restore and expand** humanitarian aid for the people of Yemen.

We call on people around the world to protest the war on January 25, 2021, just days after the U.S. presidential inauguration and the day before Saudi Arabia's 'Davos in the Desert'™ Future Investment Initiative.

We ask individuals and organizations everywhere to call for protests -- with masks and other safety precautions -- in their towns and cities on that day and make clear that the **WORLD SAYS NO TO WAR ON YEMEN**.

Please add your organization's name to this statement. For more information, please contact national@actioncorps.org.

1. Stop the War Coalition (UK)
2. Action Corps (US)
3. Yemeni Alliance Committee (US)
4. Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation (US)
5. CODEPINK (US)
6. Just Foreign Policy (US)
7. Voices for Creative Nonviolence