

Dr. Ahmad Naser Sarmast

June 8, 2024

DR. AHMAD NASER SARMAST: It's a great pleasure and honor to be standing here today in front of you to tell the story of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, once considered to be the happiest place in Afghanistan, also known as a beacon of hope for the country. When we're speaking about the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, its establishment, and then relocation and free from Afghanistan, is linked to one particular name or word, which is called Taliban.

Back in 2020 and early 2021, there was a lot of speculation in the international media, in political cycles, in — that the Taliban of 2021 would be a different Taliban than the Taliban of 1996. But for us working in Afghanistan, witnessing the crime committed by the Taliban against the people of Afghanistan, it was clear that the Taliban are not changed. Taliban will not be changed. And the Taliban are not capable of changing. That was clearly proved in the last almost three years since the return of the Taliban back to power.

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When the Taliban came, we expected that the return of the Taliban, a new cultural genocide, similarly to the cultural genocide committed by the Taliban during their first run will repeat in Afghanistan. We knew that the day of music was over. The woman rights will be denied. The cultural rights and the musical rights of the Afghan people will be once again toppled by these forces. And today, that I'm standing in front of you, Taliban, similarly to 1996, denied all musical rights of the Afghan people. Rights to learn musical languages, rights to make music, being involved in music. Rights to study musical languages, making music, and also be involved.

At the same time — in the same time, African musician have been denied rights to make a living through music education, and to have on the access all platforms so they can share their artistic abilities, their art with the wider community. In other words, today, Afghanistan is a silent nation. Entirely silent. The people of Afghanistan have been forced, once again, into silence by the Taliban.

I wish it was just the only issue, music or — and musical rights of the African people. But today, Afghanistan is being turned into a prison for half of its population. The women of Afghanistan. Since the return, the Taliban, in a systematic manner, are involved in a gender apartheid in Afghanistan.

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Afghan women have been forced out of education. They're denied education above the age of 10. They're denied access to the labor market and employment. They are denied freedom of movement within the country or outside of the country.

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Most importantly, which is very tragic and shocking, that the women of Afghanistan cannot even enjoy the nature together with the rest of their families. They are allowed — sorry, they're prevented from going to the parks and public places for leisure with the rest of their community. To make it very clear, today, Afghanistan is an open prison for its people in general, but for the women of Afghanistan entirely.

In addition to everything else, the forced dress code has been imposed to the Afghan woman. Women who moved a long way in the last 20 years before the return of the Taliban. Women who've been representing Afghanistan as diplomats worldwide. Women who acted as ministers, social figures, cultural figures. But today, once again, they're suffering for a systematic gender genocide by the Taliban. What I'm speaking about women represented everywhere, since establishment, the Afghanistan National Institute of Music did everything and was committed, and one of the objectives of the school was to empowering girls of Afghanistan. To ensuring gender equality Afghan society. To ensuring gender equality in arts and culture, but most precisely, in music. To return the musical rights of the Afghan people.

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We manage even to establish the All-Woman Orchestra of Afghanistan, which was widely acknowledged, recognized, and very popular outside Afghanistan. In our case, that served as a symbol of women emancipation in Afghanistan. But when the Taliban came back, the orchestra had to flee for their life. The return of the Taliban for Afghanistan, for musician of Afghanistan, means the return of darkness to the country. A place once considered the happiest place in Afghanistan today is under the heat of the Taliban.

The love, the happiness that exists in the school does not exist anymore. The Taliban took over the Afghanistan National Institute of Music like a military — like a military objective. They took over the school in the first hours when they entered Kabul, and since then, they have had the school under their control. The property of the school has been confiscated, its bank account has been confiscated, musical instrument broken, and this school has been turned into a military barrack of one of the notorious terrorists our time, the Haqqani Network. The same Haqqani that is in the

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blacklist of the United Nation, and still 10 million bounty exist on his whereabouts. But today, this gentleman is freely traveling around the world while still there's a restriction on his movement.

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Afghanistan was very proud of its orchestras, of the woman Orchestra, Afghan Youth Orchestra, and the music school itself. And that's why the school was widely acknowledged with number of — number of paintings around the city of the school and the orchestra. The first hour of the return of the Taliban, they not only silenced the school, but they also shut down the school. They make it inaccessible to the — to the students and to the faculty. But they began erasing from the history of us, culture and the history of music, the name of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music by painting over the murals on the streets of Kabul.

There's always after a dark night, there is bright future. Back in August, when our life was at risk, when we did not know what's going to happen with the school, whether these kids would be allowed to dream once again and to chase their dreams, we began reaching out to the people of Goodwill Worldwide. We formed a coalition of philanthropist music institutions, music advocacy group, politicians, lawyers, head of state, senators, to make sure that we rescue the students of Afghanistan National Institute of Music.

It's not because their music, their way in the full front of democratic changes in Afghanistan before the return of the Taliban. They were making a very tangible contribution not only to the revival of Afghan music, not only to the promotion of musical diversity in Afghanistan, not only to ensuring the musical rights of the Afghan people, but also towards establishing a just and civil society in Afghanistan. We were always in the hate list of the Taliban. They always wanted to silent that music school that become strong, influential, known nationally and internationally and recognized and acknowledged.

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In 2014, they sent a bomber in one of our performances. In 2015, '17, and '20s, two other networks has been arrested who've been plotting against the school. In 2020, the school was top in the hit list of the Taliban. So in such circumstances, we could know when the Taliban reach out, knowing what's happened with us in the past, what's happened with the music, we could not relax and wait what the Taliban going to do. So we began reaching to our friends outside Afghanistan, to leave Afghanistan, and to give an opportunity to our students once again.

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The government of Portugal was the first and the only country in the world that positively responded to our appeal to get the entire school community out of Afghanistan, and to give us a group asylum. That was not the end of the story. It needs to be coordinated, we need to find the resources, we need to find friends who would be negotiating on our behalf with the Taliban to make sure that the students are able to leave Afghanistan. And once we leave — left Afghanistan, also, it was very important to keep and to maintain the school together, and to make sure that the kids are not forced into the labor market, but they have got another opportunity to go back to school. To pick up their instrument back. To get into education. And to continue what they've been doing for the last — since the enrollment in the Afghanistan National Institute of Music. Learning music, playing music, and delivering smile and happiness to the Afghan people through music.

Eventually, we arrived in Portugal. We had to fight for our integrity, because we have been traveling with 73 minor students, minor musician, not accompanied by their parents. The kids were forced to leave their families behind. We had only 286 places for our community to be included and to be received in Portugal. So therefore, our top priority was students, teachers, and staff of the school. And we knew that eventually we would be able to reunite the kids with their families. And today that I'm standing here, I'm very pleased and very honored to announce that the government of Portugal agreed to receive 368 siblings and parents of the students.

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Once again, we are working very closely — [APPLAUSE] we are working very closely with the Government of Qatar, who's got a very good relationship with the Taliban, a huge influence, so we can get the families, also in a similar approach to Doha, and then we will be chartering an airplane to get them, to free them back to, and to reunite them with their families. It's not just a normal reunification when we are talking about the families, but also its ensuring freedom to another 368 people, the majority of women who are women and girls.

So in this manner, we reunite them with their families, but also we ensure their freedom, and they will be able to — once again, to dream and to chase their dreams. Since our departure, all our students are back enrolled in conservatory program. They continue their music education. And we established all ensemble and orchestras that was once a pride of Afghanistan. Today, the Afghan Youth Orchestra has been rebuilt and is back in full force at the global stages. And since 2022, we played in to many countries in Europe, including playing a sold-out concert. We played a sold-out concert in Victoria Hall in Geneva. We played a sold-out concert in Italy.

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Recently, we completed full city tour of the United Kingdom, which has all its own dramas when we've been denied visa by the UK Homeland Security offices. But eventually they changed, but we went there. Wherever we are going today, we are going with one message. In the past, before the return of the Taliban, we've been traveling to the world to show how much changed in Afghanistan. How much Afghanistan progressed. How far Afghanistan moved since the — since that removal of the Taliban.

So it was two of celebrating the return of music to Afghanistan. It was celebrating freedom of the Afghan people. It was celebrating — it was celebrating the achievement of Afghan women. But today, when we are traveling, of course, we are not traveling with a pessimistic note. We are traveling to the — also around the world, with a — with a strong voice, much taller than we've been in 2021, but with a few single messages of awareness, to raise awareness, but also to do advocacy for the restoration of the music rights, cultural rights, women's rights in Afghanistan.

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And today, when I'm standing here in front of you, once again, I'm calling on you. I clearly and strongly believe that every musician is a diplomat. So let's make together, show that the Taliban who have been brought back to Afghanistan, who have been imposed on the Afghan people, they do not get — get a recognition. Let's put our voices together to make sure the music rights of the Afghan people are returned, that the children of Afghanistan, the youth of Afghanistan, without fear, are able to benefit from the power of music. To enjoy, to make sure that delivering a musical instrument to a child will make this child to smile and make them happy.

So happen till now, everything that we did, it was possible back in Afghanistan, during those tough days, that we've just been struggling for. We did everything with the support of the people of good will. When I'm talking about the support of people of good will, it's important to acknowledge here, you. In those tough days, I will never forget that when we reached out, and my team was reaching out with musician and music industry and music advocacy group around the world, they also reached out to Simon for help and assistance.

I never forget the emails that I received back when I was struggling to get our community to safety, that Heather Noonan connected us with people of influence in the United States who could help us to get to Afghanistan, who could help us to get to the Kabul airport. Thank you very much, the League of American Orchestra, not only having me today here, for amplifying our voices, but also for being next to us on those tough days. Today, the students of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, its orchestras and ensembles, are serving as the symbol of hope, resilience, and inspiration.

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We are not only safeguarding the Afghan music, but also we're sharing it with the worldwide. Soon, we will be in the United States of America where the Afghan Youth Orchestra will be playing side by side by some member of the European Union Youth Orchestra at Kennedy Center and Carnegie Hall on the seventh and eighth of August. I hope, if you will be around, please pop in and support us. Our support was, and our existence was possible by your support, and we hope that this will continue. Our sustainability and existence to save the voice, to save African people, Afghan music, and to connect Afghan musician with the rest of the world depends on your solidarity with our institution. Thank you very much for having me. And thank you very much for making our students to dream and dream big once again.

[APPLAUSE]

END OF TRANSCRIPT