

## 24-HOUR PHONE-A-THON

# Globally, 1,000 reach out to Afghan youth

## 'Calls for peace' give insight, Toledo activist Ferner says

BLADE STAFF

KABUL, Afghanistan — They called. They sent e-mails, and they posted messages on Facebook and Twitter.

For 24 hours, people from around the world reached out to a group of young men working for peace in war-torn Afghanistan. Toledoan and longtime peace activist Mike Ferner said that throughout the daylong phone-a-thon, the young Afghans — members of Afghan Youth Peace Volunteers — fielded questions, exchanged hopeful greetings for the new year, and began a dialogue about their cravings for peace.

Ferner, who planned to leave for home today after spending more than two weeks in Afghanistan, said in a phone call with The Blade yesterday that about 1,000 people participated in the global listening project dubbed "Dear Afghanistan: A New Year's Call for Peace." He said it was a first-of-its-kind event aimed at helping people from around the world learn about Afghanistan from the very people trying to live in a country that U.S. and NATO forces have occupied for nearly a decade.

An American who called from Vietnam where she teaches English told the Afghans the Vietnamese are "proud of how they've overcome many invaders. ... They've put the war behind them and are focused on the future only."

One Afghan peace volunteer told her that is what the people of Afghanistan want too — to gain their independence and self-determination.

Ferner, a Vietnam-era veteran and president of the national group, Veterans for Peace, said he gained new insight into the plight — and spirit — of the Afghan people during his stay, his first visit

to Afghanistan.

"I got a better sense of how the people in Afghanistan feel about wanting to stop the killing," he said.

"There are some polls that have indicated that, but it's another thing to be able to talk to people directly that are affected by the fighting," he said.

Ferner said he spoke with an Afghan man who had fled his home in Helmand Province when the fighting intensified. He asked him what he would say to the American people and others in the world.

"He said, 'U.N., please to stop the bombing and please help. This is not a place for life. We need more help and support from people in the U.S. and the U.N.,'" Ferner said.

He said he also found Afghans working to find ways to end the fighting that do not include military force.

"The [Afghan] Youth Peace Volunteers — a group of men from the Bamyan Province — and

the people from Voices for Creative Nonviolence have started conversations with people here in Afghanistan, the goal of which is to try and find a way to end the fighting that does not include winning by military force," Ferner said.

"I know that sounds pretty far-fetched that that would be able to happen, but they are talking with some people here who are very familiar with the political scene in Afghanistan."

Among them are Ramazan Bashardost, a member of Parliament and former presidential candidate, and Malalai Joya, a former Parliament member and human rights activist.

A story Ferner wrote about the global listening project is posted at **CommonDreams.org**.

— Jennifer Feehan



Ferner