

It is human nature to hope. As we enter the new year, we want to feel well and think good things.

But, does everyone have hope? As you read this letter, does a young Israeli woman who is being held hostage by Hamas in an undetermined location have any hope? What does her family feel? What about a child from Gaza who survived his house, which was destroyed by the bombs of the Israeli Army, and who does not know where to go now? How does he feel about the new year? Can people really hear the news of something good in Ukraine, Myanmar, Sudan and beyond nowadays?

Every war causes ethical shock as well as political and social destruction. In such times, the interests of states and nations take precedence over the needs of people and they try to direct daily language accordingly. So much so that sometimes even talking about the lives of innocents or peace seems against national interests.

We know that the word peace is not the oldest word of humanity. Since ancient societies needed peace, it means that there was war before that. The question for us writers is not about the old but about the new: Which one should be the new and last word of humanity, war or peace?

War divides societies into vertical sections, draws national lines and makes everyone behind these lines appear as enemies to each other. However, while these vertical divisions separate societies from one another, we look at life horizontally and try to build bridges that cross borders. It was no coincidence that PEN International emerged after the devastation of the First World War. It was no coincidence that PEN, a writer's organization, established a committee dedicated solely to peace in the midst of the Cold War. *The Writers for Peace Committee* we established in 1984 was a concrete step expressing the dream of the peaceful development of literature and life in general. The fact that this dream is still needed in the twenty-first century shows that the course of the world is not at the desired level.

A war that breaks out in one place is not limited to that place, it spreads to every region in different forms and endangers the future. The latest conflict in the Middle East is already causing a simultaneous rise in anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in many places. Calls for cultural boycott also enlarge this problem. PEN International's call for cultural dialogue maintains its value today as it did in the past.

We are united, as “*we champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace and equality in one world*”. That is our strength.

Our efforts are not in vain. It is an acknowledgement that in recent years, advocates of peace, dialogue and freedom of expression have been deemed worthy of the Nobel Prize. People like Nargis Mohammadi, Ales Bialiatski, Dimitry Muratov and Maria Ressa have been recognized with international support from communities including the great family of PEN International.

We believe in the nation of writers, as we now celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). We reflect on the role played by the PEN movement in shaping the meaning and messages of what would become a global road map for freedom, equality, and human rights for all. In shaping this global charter, PEN's literary spirit has not only penned words but woven a narrative of freedom, human rights, and international solidarity.

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With this belief, I would like to share with you a film prepared by Germany's DW Channel, focusing on PEN International's fight for freedom of expression and stating why dictators are afraid of literature:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9FBFB7DnJo>

We may sometimes feel despair in us. But we continue to write, read, and reach out to others, keeping in mind the value of a single person's voice and its impact on history. It is an award for all of us that Jon Fosse, who received the Nobel Prize in Literature this year, writes with a minority dialect, Nynorsk, and through which he gives a voice to the world from a far away corner in shadow.

When I attended the Frankfurt Book Fair in October, one of the most important meetings was the event of the guest country Slovenia. The importance of “deep readings” or “higher level readings” was discussed around the *Ljubljana Reading Manifesto*, which was also supported by PEN International. I emphasized in my speech that free reading is a way of higher level reading, and writers, readers and organizations like us who strive to ensure this freedom embrace the value of reading.

Mystic poet Al-Hallaj said a thousand years ago: *“Hell is not the place where we suffer, / it's the place where no one hears us suffering.”*

We hear the painful voices of people in Sudan, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Ukraine, Israel, Palestine and beyond, and let's hope they hear our voices too. They deserve a hopeful new year more than anyone.

I wish you a better year ahead with your family and loved ones.

With solidarity,

Burhan Sonmez

President, PEN International