



Youth keeps occupied, enjoying the sea (above) or helping to sweep the streets of Benghazi



Nick Redmayne reports from Benghazi

**W**alking towards the heart of revolutionary Libya on Benghazi's corniche, I'm accosted by Bashir, a former flight officer with Libyan Arab Airlines. Bashir picks up a plastic bottle from a pile of rubbish, "It makes me ashamed. Still it's 42 years, 42 years can you believe it? To think we'll be in good shape after three months, it's too much."

Save for localised attempts at acrid incineration, refuse has been piling up in parts of the city. With government tanks poised to crush the uprising, the Keep Benghazi Tidy campaign has understandably taken a back seat.

However, change may be afoot. A few hundred metres from the Mediterranean, Ibrahim is overseeing a group of boys wearing fluorescent jackets. Some sweep walkways, others paint kerbstones alternately black and white. "Because of the problems, the schools are closed right now. We give them something useful to do. Our association is organising to make the city better. Do you want to see our office?"

Five minutes' drive later, in a middle-class Benghazi suburb, a small office is proudly emblazoned 'Ras Abaydah Charitable Association'. Inside, 21-year-old old Mohammed speaks English clearly and deliberately. "We have a mixture of people helping, doctors, accountants like Ibrahim – all kinds of people. Younger people help us with the cleaning, painting, things like that." I follow Mohammed across the street, where he opens the doors to the local headquarters of the former Revolutionary Committee – the insidious eyes and ears of the ruling regime in Ras Abaydah. "We're taking this over. Can you believe this place? I've lived here all my life and it's only now that I get to see inside." In one room an older man sits filling plastic bags with sugar from a sack. In another, piles of basic foodstuffs await distribution. Mohammed points to a black bin liner and says, "Since the revolution, prices

have increased so much. We give out about 150 of these to underprivileged families each month." Another helper opens the bag and displays the contents – tea, pasta, tinned fish and rice. "We buy this food with donations, or sometimes food arrives at the port and we get a telephone call to collect it." On the next floor, Mohammed shows me a corridor of smaller rooms. "Here we plan a clinic, 13 consulting rooms – there's plenty of space. Of course we can't do all this at once, but slowly. Maybe after three or four months, giving food to the people, there will not be such a thing, but the other work will continue for a long time."

Outside, another young man, Abdul Salam, is taking the breeze in front of his home. I ask how life has been in this part of Benghazi. "It's hard. I have three friends missing – alive or dead? But I don't know anyone who is affected mentally in a bad way. They all share the same idea. They are sad about the injuries, they are sad about the young people dying, but in general it's worth it, there is a price to pay and it's worth it, and everybody understands it."

Walking back to the car, we pass a Bedouin tent somewhat incongruously erected on wasteland. A middle aged man, Abu Faris, sits at the entrance and motions to me to sit down, proffering coffee. "What are you doing here?" I ask. "Right now we take it in shifts to check who is coming, who is going – we look after each other." "How long will you be here?" I ask. Abu Faris takes a contemplative sip of his coffee. "You know, we as Libyans are a great tree, that for so, so, so long has not been watered. Now, maybe by Allah, maybe by what has been going on around us, maybe because we arrive at a moment and we're just fed up, but it's started. We have been watered. And in our roots there's still life. When Gaddafi goes, then we'll take this tent down and return to our homes."



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