

Our Journey to Mogadishu

Fear and Hope

It is well known internationally that Somalia has been destroyed completely by a prolonged civil war that continued over 25 years. As a result, Khadijo and I longed to be part of the solution and the process of recovery by facilitating peace training in Mogadishu: the city of paradoxes where ghost, danger, and mystery coexist alongside hope and fear. The idea of our peace project has been building within us for many years. So, we thought that our initiative should be translated into real life rather than remaining as an elusive idea. Yes, we wanted to make some positive differences in the lives of young Somalis who have grown up in the middle of war, fear, disillusionment and hopelessness. We wanted to inspire them and help them build peace of mind. So, Khadijo and I were enthusiastic to go to Somalia and share with young Somalis our knowledge and experience in conflict transformation, dialogue, reconciliation, and peace-building values we learnt through diverse experiences and insights in different peace institutions, trainings and workshops. We felt this was a duty and that the time was right.

The first setback was the unbearable fear that came from our close friends and relatives from the Somali community in Melbourne when we shared our plan of going to Mogadishu. We were warned "don't go there".

Somalis are an oral society and news of our intended journey spread through the community like a summer bushfire fuelled by extreme winds and reached to our relatives in Mogadishu even before we told them of our plan.

One night, my mobile rung 'ding...ding...ding' "can I talk to Yusuf" asked a lady. "It is me, Yusuf" I responded. "I am your sister.... and I've heard that you're coming to Mogadishu, true?" She inquired. "Yes I do" I responded. "Walaal (my brother) don't come here. I am your sister; I love you from my heart and I tell you the truth. If you come you're dead. Brother, it is a matter of life and death. Do you understand what I mean?" she continued.

“Okay, I will think about this issue” I answered. My heart was pounding. Other calls from friends and relatives echoed the first call. “Militias with vested interests in maintaining the status quo of violence not peace may harm you”. They pointed me to the fact that my article about Al-Shabab in The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age in 2013 soon after the Westgate Mall terrorist attack in Nairobi was available in the Social media as an incitement that fuelled our risk.

Additionally, there were rumours that Al-Shabab targets Diaspora returnees because they believe that the diaspora bring with them packages of Western values and life style which threaten Al-Shabab’s version of Islam. A well-known Somali cartoonist named Amin Amir used his webpage to depict a lot of men from diaspora with shaved heads. I am shaved. Somali locals say that Somali diaspora men shave to neutralise their baldness. Some locals believe that shaving regularly demonstrates a western influence. So, while I am in Mogadishu I decided to use a traditional Somali hat called Baraawe so I looked like a local man different to my picture appeared in The Age Newspaper with a bowler hat. There was a deep misunderstanding between diaspora returnees and the Somali locals. The locals believe the diasporas take their employment opportunities; and earn higher salaries than the locals. In fact many of the Diaspora flee Somalia if they lose their positions or feel their security is at stake but locals don’t have these options. The diasporas are also accused of bringing bad social behaviour, and lifestyles home. They may also be seen as arrogant or of having no substance or quality while misusing the reputation of their naturalised countries. On the other hand, locals are described by diasporas as narrow minded and incompetent people who lack external experiences, sense of law or regulation, work ethics or governance skills. Locals are also said to be jealous of qualifications, experiences, privileges or the well-respected passports gained from the West.

Khadijo and I decided not to talk about our plan to go to Mogadishu and instead we began talking about a trip to Nairobi so that the overwhelming fear generated by others, would not consume us.

We were so scared to the point we consulted with Mogadishu University (MU) representatives requesting a diversion of our training to their campus in Bosaso in the autonomous State of Puntland, because it was more stable than Mogadishu. However, MU advised us to keep to our original idea of organising the training in Mogadishu. This is because no group targeted non-governmental educational institutions like Mogadishu University. Almost all universities –

except the Somali National University re-opened last year after 24 years of closure - are non-governmental. This gave us some relief. After prayers and reflections, Khadijo and I decided to run the training in Mogadishu.

Nairobi was our way from and to Mogadishu. We stayed with Khadijo's sister Fadumo and her Husband Fowsi. They cared for us exceptionally well. Fowsi and Fadumo offered us to look after Eemaan if we go to Mogadishu and without their help it would have been difficult to run this training. We wanted to plan for all eventualities so the night before we left for Mogadishu, we asked Fadumo that if we were killed in Mogadishu, Eemaan should go to her grandmother, mum Hawo in UK.

On Friday 1st of May, we boarded a privately owned Somali airplane called Jubba Airways, alongside a MU representative Mr Abdiwali appointed by Professor Ali Sheikh, president of MU to accompany and care for on our journey to Mogadishu. Unlike the rumours from some Somalis, the condition of the plane seemed normal. This was the first positive impression on our way to the city described as the most dangerous place in the world. We felt calm and well supported. We left Jomo Kenyatta International Airport at 7:30 am and arrived in Aden Adde International Airport in Mogadishu around 9 am. We had not visited Somalia for 22 years. When we landed, Khadijo became emotional and I saw her wiping from her cheeks tears. For me, it was like a daydream to be in my motherland that I had fled two decades ago because of violence and vice. Al-hamdu lillaah (thanks for God) I murmured. Mogadishu was extremely hot and I sweated from the head to the toe. "Is this the Mogadishu we knew?" asked Khadijo. "I am glad that we left Eemaan behind otherwise her situation could have been very difficult in this heat. Tonight will be my first night I am away from Eemaan and I will miss my daughter. My heart is splitting. But what can I do? Although no one can replace my role as mum, I'm confident that Fadumo will provide whatever Eemaan needs".

A Turkish company recently reconstructed the Mogadishu airport but we felt that management in the airport was a bit chaotic and confusing. Perhaps because the most of Somalis in Somalia were born just prior to or during the civil war and have never experienced law and order. It is hard for them to manage rules and regulations they have never known their entire lives.

When we got outside of the airport, we were surprised by seeing many barriers and check points set up by security forces to prevent car suicides from Al-Shabab. The city looked completely different. We saw many Somali and AMISOM soldiers lurking behind military armours and semi-tanks and driving recklessly along the potholed streets of Mogadishu. MU provided us with a wonderful air-conditioned car with an experienced driver who had been driving these dangerous roads for the last 25 years. After 15 minutes, we arrived at our new home for the following two weeks, the Shamo Hotel booked by the university. Shamo is one of best hotels both for services and security. However, we were uncomfortable staying there because of the past painful memory associated with this hotel. Four former Somali ministers and many medical graduates celebrating their accomplishments were killed in terrorist bombs carried out by Al-Shabab in 2009 and hearing the word Shamo was a constant reminder to that awful attack. Some of our local visitors also commented on the murder that happened in the Hotel.

On our first night, we went to the roof of our hotel and saw glowing lights from all corners of the city. When Khadijo and I left Mogadishu in 1994 and 1993, it was the darkest city in the world perhaps without a single light but now it is shining and bustling city. Again, in the early morning we ran to the roof and saw many students in yellow, blue and white uniforms walking individually or in groups to their schools. That made us realise that the city was in recovery yet it was still a fragile with poor public services which were expected to be a priority of the weak and fledging government. Seeing these positive developments in Mogadishu lessened the fear created by others.

On our second day, MU offered us for lunch at Beach View Restaurant located at the well known and magical Liido beach. After a wonderful lunch we were taken on a tour and saw that a large part of the city specifically around Kaaraan suburbs are still completely destroyed while other parts of the city has begun to flourish and thrive. When asked our guide these differences, he said that diverse clans and the international community inhabit the recovering part while only one clan occupies the less recovered part. This is evidence of the benefit of diversity even on a small scale.

The accommodation provided by MU was unique and supreme. We received a warm welcome, which alleviated our fear and brought us a sense of peace.

As soon as we arrived in Mogadishu, we began holding meetings with Mogadishu University officials and after three days of consultation with a committee we began delivering our intensive and purposeful 4 days of training. (4th-7th May, 2015). Participants were very hungry for learning, discussion, self-change and social transformation. The learning style in Somalia used to be a teacher-centred and one way process, but at MU, we experienced an approach similar to that we learnt in Australia and UK. Participants enjoyed our delivery, and student-centred facilitation, and interactive two ways processes. According to the feedback received during and after the training, the program was well received to the extent that some participants suggested we should run it again for another group who were not given the opportunity to attend.

About one-third of the 27 participants were young women consistent with general participation of females in the MU (approximately 35% of students are women). Before Khadijo, these young women had rarely or never seen a Somali woman with a PhD. They have also rarely seen a Somali woman lecturing at University in a male dominated society. Khadijo was a positive role model for MU female students and many of these young women expressed their admiration through comments and Buraanbur (women's poetry) in which they praised Khadijo's commitment to obtaining a PhD from one of the best universities in UK. These young women also appreciated Khadijo's compassion and desire to give back to her people. Thus, Khadijo has become like a tall tree that everyone in Mogadishu can look up. Others commented that they have never seen a Somali couple who both have PhDs. The president of MU Professor Ali Sheikh underlined this by saying that to his knowledge, Khadijo and I were only the second family of PhD holders in the Somali society after Professor Abdi Ismail Samatar and his wife Associate Professor Awo Abdi, both at the University of Minnesota. Most people we met in Mogadishu commented that they have never seen a husband and wife team of Somali background delivering such training together.

MU has a well-established staff. Many we met have PhDs mostly from Sudan and this is a promising indicator of a better future for the country.

In conclusion, the training was successful and a wonderful process of learning, gaining, reflection and reconnection to the country and comrades we were forced to leave behind two decades ago because of the appalling civil war.

On Thursday 7th May, we celebrated the completion of the symposium and Khadijo left Mogadishu 2 days later to join Eemaan in Nairobi but I stayed there until 13th of May. We have just left Mogadishu but Khadijo and I are already thinking about our next peace symposium in Mogadishu perhaps in this December.

Bye Mogadishu, bye our inspiring participants, bye Shamo Hotel, bye Mogadishu University and bye Somalia. We have left you physically but we are with you emotionally and we promise to come back again and again and again.

Wasalaam

Dr Yusuf Sheikh Omar