

Citation Pernille La Lau for Dr. Hawa Abdi

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be here today, and to be asked to present one of the Four Freedoms Awards.

In 2011 I visited Dadaab, the world's largest refugee camp, located in an arid portion of eastern Kenya near the Somali border, in order to create a documentary for the Dutch Refugee Foundation called Stichting Vluchteling. Upon our arrival we heard that we were in danger of being kidnapped by the Al Qaida supported Al Shabaab militia from Somalia, and that we had to be ever so careful while filming in the camp. Its inhabitants were, and still are, mainly from Somalia.

Seeing malnourished and starving children, holding their arms and hands which felt as brittle as matches, and talking to their desperate parents, struck my heart with indignation and anger. Most of them had just been forced to decide in a split second whether to run over the Somali border with or without their children, starting their long journey in pursuit of survival. Walking hundreds of kilometres on bare feet, crossing land inhabited with lions, and having no food to survive on. Dadaab refugee camp was constructed in 1992, to host 90-thousand refugees as a result of war in Somalia. Today, the camp is the home of 460-thousand refugees.

I was looking for hope in Dadaab, but conditions were so harsh and lives were taken so easily every day.... that Dadaab causes you to think hope is far away. But if you look well, behind the despair you will see the flexible minds and spirits of those who will find their way through, no matter what.

Hope was present in the eyes of the people when you gave them a smile, when we shared joy when a child gained one ounce of weight. Hope was the main important factor to keep people fighting for their lives. Hope for a future is what made people in Dadaab want to go to school, study and create a life. ≈

When I was there, I had not yet heard about the lady in Somalia, who as early as 1991 had already created her own refuge for Somali inhabitants, she herself being a victim of war in her own country.

Let me tell you her story:

Dr Hawa Abdi Diblaawe had always been a child who was conscious of her surroundings. Born in 1947 in the Somali Capital of Mogadishu, she decided to become a physician when she was only 12 years old, and had witnessed her mother die in childbirth.

Being a girl who immediately understood her responsibility for the rest of the family, she studied hard and won a scholarship at the age of seventeen to study medicine in Kiev.

The first female gynaecologist of Somalia returned to her home country in 1971; 24 years old. Soon she launched the Rural Health Development Organization; a one room non profit clinic, that offered free health services to rural Somali women. It didn't take long for the clinic to grow, because the news about Hawa's warm caring and excellent services spread fast.

When the catastrophic events of the early 1990's in Somalia came, and turned into a brutal civil war and finally famine, Dr Hawa Abdi Diblaawe opened her house to anyone who wanted to come. The clinic became a place of refuge from the twin horrors of civil war and famine.

Thousands of your professional fellow-countrymen, and also United Nations and many international relief workers left Somalia in the chaos of those years. But Dr Hawa refused to leave and instead rededicated herself to the values of her beloved grandmother which were taught to her as a child—to love your country and its people, especially the poor and the displaced.

And another important Somali saying kept her on her feet too: “when a stranger comes to your house, you must give him all you can to comfort him. This will bring good things”.

90-thousand desperate, hungry and frightened people stayed on her family's property.

In 2007, the Rural Health Development Organization was renamed the Dr. Hawa Abdi Foundation. With the help of her two daughters, who decided to follow in her footsteps and become doctors too, as well as donations from an increasingly appreciative world, the clinic expanded to become a 400 bed hospital, with three operating rooms, supported by a staff of six other physicians and more than 40 nurses. A school was built, and an adult education centre that offered literacy, and nutrition classes for women.

Then came the dark days of May 2010, when the compound came under an attack launched by a local war lord. Threatened at gun point and held captive for a week while members of the militia ransacked and destroyed much of the hospital, Dr Hawa refused to give in to their demands, or to leave.

If I must die, she insisted, "I will die with your people and with dignity." Showing no fear Dr Hawa Abdi confronted her captors with a simple question: what had *they* done for the Somali people?

Inspired by her extraordinary courage, hundreds of women from the sprawling camp rose up in protest and amazingly, the militants backed down and left, but not before she demanded—and got—a written apology from their leader.

Since then, Dr Hawa Abdi and her fellow workers have continued to provide health care, food and clean water to the tens of thousands seeking refuge. But the work and the danger continue, because of looming famine, and further attacks from other militias, including an assault in February 2012 by Al-Shabbat that devastated much of the compound.

Dr Hawa Abdi Diblaawe, reading your memoirs, it is ever so clear that you know how to keep hope alive. Not only in your own inner spirit, but also for all the people around you. Your courage, your wisdom and struggle for life are a beacon to many others.

We hope that acknowledgement and attention for your great strength, will give new empowerment to you and the Somali people, to keep on striving for prosperity and humanity.

It's an honour for me to present you with the Freedom From Want Roosevelt Medal;

Dr Hawa Adi Diblaawe.

Unfortunately, Dr Hawa Abdi Diblaawe is not with us today, because her poor health prevents her from undertaking such a long journey. But her daughter, Dr Deqo Aden Mohammed is here to receive the Roosevelt Freedom from Want award.