



# The Right Livelihood Award

*for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people*

Dekha Ibrahim Abdi (Kenya)†

(2007)



*"... for showing in diverse ethnic and cultural situations how religious and other differences can be reconciled, even after violent conflict, and knitted together through a cooperative process that leads to peace and development".*

Photo: Wolfgang Schmidt

**Dekha Ibrahim Abdi was a global peacemaker from rural Kenya. She was engaged in peace work and conflict resolution in many of the world's most divided countries. Her comprehensive methodology combined grassroots activism, a soft but uncompromising leadership, and a spiritual motivation drawing on the teachings of Islam.**

## **Dekha's early life**

Dekha Abdi, born in Wajir in 1964, grew up in a mixed neighbourhood of different ethnic groups and religions. Although a Muslim, her closest childhood friends were Christian and of a different ethnic group. At secondary school, students were divided along religious and ethnic lines into two camps, but Dekha and her friends created a space between these opposing camps by sticking together; a space which grew as it was joined by many other students who did not want to choose one camp over the other. These early actions were the backbone of her philosophy of inter-religious co-operation and subsequent peace work. She was convinced that working towards positive relations between different groups and faiths is crucial in order to achieve durable peace.

## **Starting a grassroots peace initiative: The Wajir Peace Committee**

Wajir is one of the Northern Kenyan districts that was under emergency law from 1963 to 1990, with government forces fighting an active guerrilla movement (the Shifta war). When the emergency and quasi-occupation ended, the security situation deteriorated even more. There was an open conflict which claimed 1500 lives, and which resulted in a lot of hatred between different clans. In 1992, Dekha and other women as well as concerned men started a grassroots peace initiative, bringing together people from all clans. Despite opposition from the traditional clan leaders (elder men), they began to organise mediation between the warring parties (with representatives of minority groups acting as moderators). When an agreement was in place, they set up the Wajir Peace Committee, with representatives of all parties - clans, Government security organs, Parliamentarians, civil servants, Muslim and Christian religious leaders, NGOs etc. - to implement the agreement. Dekha, who had been working as coordinator for a mobile primary health care project for nomadic people, was elected as Secretary of the Peace committee hence undertaking dual roles.

## Reaching out

The model developed in Wajir, which Dekha described as "a peace and development committee - a structure for responding to conflict at a local level", was used again in 1998, when the Christian community in Wajir experienced some violence. Dekha assisted in the formation of a disaster committee of Muslim women to assist and make amends with the Christian community. They held prayer meetings with Muslim and Christian women, in which both shared their experience and thereby strengthened their relationship. Subsequently the Wajir Peace Committee began to include Christian women, leading to the formation of an inter-faith committee for peace which has undertaken further activities to intervene in religious conflicts.

Fostering inter-faith dialogue and attempting to resolve tensions and conflict between religions had been a central focus of Dekha's activity since her first involvement in working for peace, and her methods have now been copied not only elsewhere in Kenya, but in Uganda, Ethiopia, Sudan, and South Africa. In addition, Dekha has taught in Somalia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Canada, Cambodia, Philippines, Ghana, Nigeria, Netherlands, Zimbabwe, and the UK.

In 1996-97 Dekha was team leader for the Community Development training programme of the Arid Lands Resource Management Project in Kenya. She has written extensively and was the Organising Board Member of Nomadic and Pastoralists Development Initiative, a Kenyan rural development initiative. Also in 1997 she was a founding member of the regional Coalition of Peace in Africa (COPA). As East African Regional Coordinator, she was involved in the Linking Peace Practice to Policy (LPP) programme of the COPA, funded by Comic Relief in the UK. LPP seeks to support and link communities in volatile areas in conflict prevention and peace-building work. Dekha also, in 1998, became Training and Learning Co-ordinator of Responding to Conflict (RTC) which engages in conflict transformation: planning, organizing and facilitating a range of conflict resolution training programmes. She was also a Board Member of Co-existence International, an initiative committed to strengthening the field of policymakers, practitioners, researchers, advocates, organizations and networks promoting co-existence. Dekha was a founding Member of a Global Peace Practitioners Network ACTION for conflict transformation and since September 2000, had been a member of a consortium of African and international conflict transformation specialists working together on development of a series of intensive, participatory workshops for the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). UNDESA assists governments and civil society partners in sub-Saharan Africa to strengthen their capacities for anticipating, containing and managing conflict situations. Since 2002 Dekha had also been a patron of the London-based NGO Peace Direct. She worked towards inter-religious/ethnic co-operation in this capacity through co-facilitating a project which aimed to provide a platform for young Muslims from all UK backgrounds, after the London bombings, to explore issues and challenges around being a Muslim and British in current UK society. Dekha was a Member of the International Advisory Board of the University of Ulster, INCORE London-Derry, North Ireland. She was a Board Member of the Berghof Center in Germany.

Dekha last lived in Mombasa and worked on peace, conflict and development issues with a number of organisations. She raised funds to support community groups in peace-building and communication infrastructure and continued to work for the Wajir community with young people to create economic development. She supported Peace Practitioners through mentoring and coaching in order to create a second generation of peace workers in Kenya and on the Horn of Africa.

In Mombasa she has supported the setting up of the Oasis of Peace Centre, helping the local communities in Kikambala to do some basic mediation, and she worked as an advisor to the Kenyan government for mediation work in different parts of the country.

In 1999 Dekha was awarded the Distinguished Medal for Service by the District Commissioner for Wajir on behalf of the Kenyan Government, and in 2005 was named Kenyan Peace Builder of the Year. She was also nominated as one among 1000 women for the Nobel Prize in 2005, now known as 1000 Peace women across the globe, and received the 2009 Hessian Peace Prize (Germany).

## Qu'ran's teaching as background

Dekha's religious and spiritual identity as a Muslim formed a strong foundation for her peace work.

Her religious beliefs informed her vision of how peace is to be achieved. She referred to and explored the Qu'ran's teaching on understanding the soul in the context of outlining what is necessary for bringing about a sincere and durable peace. Indeed, Dekha encouraged individuals and communities affected by conflict to critically analyse themselves using verses from the Qu'ran, which she stated would enable them to build their conflict transformation on a religious and spiritual base.

### **Dekha's principles for comprehensive peace building**

Dekha defined a set of principles that summarise her experience of comprehensive peace building, linking peace theory and policy with pragmatic action, and private lobbying/advocacy with public mobilisation. Sometimes she expressed this through the acronym AFRICA: Analysis, Flexibility, Responsiveness, Innovation, Context-specific and awareness, and Action/learning-orientation.

Dekha Ibrahim Abdi passed away on July 14th, 2011, after a severe car accident.

### **Quotation**

*"The participation in a peace process is not about the mathematics of numbers and percentages in relation to who is in majority or minority. It is about plurality, diversity, participation and ownership of all affected by the conflict ..."*

Dekha Ibrahim Abdi

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