

Laudatory speech for Farah Abdullahi Abdi
Category: Unknown Peace Worker
Speaker: Britta Ratsch-Menke



Dear guests, dear Farah Abdullahi Abdi,

I am delighted to share the honour with you this evening, Farah Abdi, of paying tribute to a very young man. You are 20 years old and the recipient of the Bremen Peace Award as the “Unknown Peace Worker”.

For most of those here this evening, you are probably as unknown as you were to the members of the *schwelle* Foundation’s board of trustees before being nominated for the Bremen Peace Award. You were proposed by Maria Pisani, lecturer at the University of Malta, and a good friend of you. Farah’s brother, Faisal Abdullahi Abdi, was unfortunately denied a visa by the German Embassy in Nairobi.

You, Farah Abdi, are far from unknown on the island state of Malta, where you have been living since

November 2012. You regularly write a blog for the newspaper Malta Today. You have worked in cooperation with the Maltese government in creating projects for refugees, and in particular for women. You have worked together with representatives of the European Union, especially regarding the rights of refugee children and adolescents. Twice, you were a visitor at the UNO headquarters in Geneva: in 2004, as a speaker at a conference on the subject of adolescent refugees, and this year to discuss how refugees contribute to world-wide development.

Therefore, it is perhaps no surprise that you came from Somalia to Malta, and here today as our honoured guest in the town hall in Bremen. It is an unusual career all the same. Dear guests, in order to give you a deeper understanding of this career, I would like to tell you something about Farah Abdi’s life. I will mostly refer to information from the blog which you yourself published in Malta Today.

Farah Abdi was born on 21st July 1995 in Beledweyne in Central Somalia. At the age of 3, he and his parents go to the neighbouring country of Kenya on account of the further escalation of the civil war in Somalia. Initially, the family lives in a refugee camp where the living conditions are, however, so difficult that they go to the capital city Nairobi to start a new life. Farah and his older brother Faisal grow up in middle-class area of Nairobi, in a “conservative Somali family”, as Farah himself puts it. Their father is a strict Moslem who expects the times of prayer and the study of the Koran to be observed. His mother takes great care of him and his brother. In certain aspects, she was also conservative, but in others more liberal than his father. Thus, Farah Abdi is taught Somali values and qualities which still influence him and are important to him today: Perseverance and the power of endurance, the flexibility of the nomad, total abstinence from alcohol.

At the same time, it was his mother in particular, but also his grandmother who lived with them, who gave him great faith in himself, as well as in God to accompany him through life. When Farah begins to suffer on account of his chubbiness, his beloved grandmother comforted him and said: “My child, I want you to walk through life with your head held high, for God has created you in his own image”. These words became something of a personal red thread for him during all difficult moments of his life.

His parents make sure that he and his brother receive a good school education. At school and through contact with friends, they learn English and Kiswahili, Somali is spoken at home. This enables Farah to make contact with different lives and worlds: with his direct surroundings as well as with his Somali culture of origin and international connections.

Even during childhood, Farah feels that he is different to most of the other boys around him. The way he perceives his own body and his interests are different. He loves music, American TV shows, fashion, acting, all things which are forbidden at home on account of them having a corruptive influence. When he realises that he is homosexual, he even has to hide this from his mother as it would have torn her apart.

Homosexuality is taboo in Kenya and Somalia, as it is in most African countries. It is seen as an unnatural curse and homosexual encounters between men can be punished with 5-14 years in prison.

As a homosexual man, Farah Abdi can only express his sexual orientation and, as a result, an essential part of his identity in secret. As a native Somali, his position is even more dangerous. Members of the Islamic Al-Shabab militia also infiltrate the Somali community in Kenya and try to find "traitors". Since 2009, they have attacked school-leaving ceremonies organised by pupils as they see education as a sign of western decadence. According to their interpretation of the Sharia, heterosexual adulterers must be beheaded and Farah has nightmares when he imagines what they would do with him if his appearance draws attention to, or even leads them to discover, his homosexuality.

Farah realises that through permanent self-denial, pretence and fear he risks emotionally crippling himself. At the age of 16, he decides to leave home. After his visa is denied by the Swiss Embassy in Nairobi, in February 2012 he begins his long and dangerous escape to Europe.

I only wish to mention briefly the different stages of his escape route. They are symbolic of the terrible experiences made by millions, especially young men, women and children, who have already taken this path and those who begin this journey every day anew. They do not leave looking for adventure, but because their native countries deny them fundamental human rights, because of civil war and arbitrary violence, or because poverty and the lack of perspective in their home countries, or in the refugee camps where they live, have taken on such a dimension that they no longer see a future there.

From Kenya, Farah's path first takes him through the neighbouring country Uganda, and then into South Sudan. South Sudanese militia believe him to be a spy from North Somalia. They arrest and torture him. After his release, he crosses the Sahara, squashed together with 32 others on a pick-up truck. He is arrested five times in Libya on account of being a migrant without documents. He experiences breaches of the refugees' human rights in Libya on a daily basis. In the edition of Malta Today from 15th April 2014, he tells: *"People were forced to work from dawn until dusk without payment. Rape was used to torture both men and women and instil them with fear. Once arrested, they were kept in wretched jails without ever having been brought before a court."*

Until 2011, under the dictator Ghaddafi, Libya was an ally of the European states, in particular of Italy under Sylvio Berlusconi, united in preventing refugees from leaving Africa across the Mediterranean. Since the collapse of his regime, many have managed to set out across the sea with the help of paid refugee agents. When the discussion once again turns to creating refugee reception camps outside Europe where applications for asylum can be made – do German and European politicians really believe that in a country like Libya exterritorial and legally secure zones can be created overnight? Farah saw it as pure cynicism when asked during an interview about the procedure for granting the right of asylum on Malta as to why he did not apply for asylum in Libya instead of coming to Malta.

What made it possible for Farah Abdi to go through this hell? He answers this question in the following way in his contributions to Malta Today from April 2014:

"I was unaware of my energy resources, but I had had enough of living a lie and wanted to free myself. (...) At night, we sat together and talked about our hopes and expectations. Talking about my dreams was what drove me on to set my sights high, even when things became tough." (...)

"I knew that my mother was praying for me and I was very lucky to meet a large group of people who held my hand whenever it became really hard. The Somalis I travelled with protected me as I was the youngest in

the group. They wanted to protect me from being attacked because they knew that I was not used to the death and destruction which prevailed in our country as I had grown up in Kenya.

When he reaches the coast of Malta in November 2012, Farah Abdi describes himself as a physically and emotionally broken man afraid of his own shadow.

On Malta, he is initially at least physically safe, but psychotherapy was necessary to restore peace in his soul. Although this is a real necessity, there are far too few therapy opportunities for refugees and survivors of torture – not only on Malta, but also in Bremen. This therapy enabled him not to define himself as just a victim, not to get caught in his past despite existing problems, but to develop his own sense of humanity.

From then on, Farah Abdi, you wanted to live your dreams and be a source of encouragement for others. “Empowerment” is your key word and means for you helping people to choose their own path in life, to decide for themselves which steps they take.

However, having arrived in the free western world, you encountered unimagined difficulties. These include structural obstacles in the form of laws for refugees. I would like to mention 2 examples of this:

- ✦ Asylum seekers spend 12 months in prison, even minors. The same is true of several other European countries, as for example, Hungary.
The transit areas, which some German politicians currently wish to set up at the borders, would actually probably lead to immigrants being held in detention camps and to summary procedures, as already exist today at international airports like Frankfurt and Paris.
- ✦ According to European law, refugees do not have freedom of movement within Europe, and cannot, for example, choose where they want to live. They are only once allowed to apply for asylum in the country where they first put their foot on European ground. Consequently in the 90’s and at the beginning of this century, the peripheral European states, and in particular the Mediterranean countries like Malta, took in a disproportionate number of refugees. Malta’s government has been saying for a long time that they are unable to cope with this situation. In line with an agreement with the UNHRC, in 2011 Germany took a mere 100 refugees who had been living on Malta up until then.
Now that the refugees can no longer be held back in camps at the European border, but instead set off on foot in huge numbers to the centre of Europe, the term “refugee crisis” has come into use. As if this hadn’t already been the case in the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria for a very long time.
In the past months, the European Union as a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, has painted a picture of itself as a desolate bunch merely motivated by self-interest. Every single activity was not aimed at fighting the causes of the refugee crisis, but rather at limiting access to European territory.

In spite of all criticism, I would like to say something positive at this point: I believe it is a good thing that our chancellor has been touched by the suffering of the refugees when they were literally standing outside our front door.

I am also proud of the behaviour and actions of tens of thousands of citizens. Volunteers, as well as a large number of workers within charity organisations and communities, communes and the towns and cities, have shown great commitment, sometimes even to the point of exhaustion, to ensure that refugees are taken care of – some of them have been doing so for many years, others began more recently.

It is important to support these people and to make very clear to the public: not only is it ethically condemnable for Germany and Europe to cut themselves off as an island of the rich and the blessed, considering the complex nature of economic structures and arms supplies. It simply will not work – not even with the use of barbed wire fences and armed force. Individuals who exploit the fear of a rapid change within our society in an effort to make racist ideologies socially acceptable, have to be opposed with all means. And here we are not only talking about intellectual or real arson committed on the right fringe. There is a much more subtle form of racism within the general public. And here I would like once again to return to the experiences of our winner of the Peace Award.

Farah Abdi, before you set off for Europe, you could never have imagined that your dark skin could still, in the 21st century, stand in the way of a position within society based on equal rights. You are repeatedly asked: “How is it possible that you come from Africa and yet speak English so well?” “How is it possible that you originally come from Somalia and are so well-educated?” Even here in Bremen, which we consider to be a really liberal-minded city, both of my German-Togolese daughters, one slightly older and the other slightly younger than you, have shared the same experience.

Farah Abdi, you chose to make the journey to Europe to be free. You took the commitment of the confederation of states at its word, as well as its promise to be a place of peace and freedom. And you decided to continue your fight for freedom here in Europe:

For your freedom as a man seeking refuge – against structural marginalisation;

for your freedom as a proud Somali against prejudice and the burden of history and of the current situation in your native country;

for your freedom as a homosexual against heterosexual and homosexual clichés.

When, in May 2015, we as members of the board of trustees of the *schwelle* Foundation chose you from among a great number of worthy proposals, we did not realise how acutely the question of how to deal with refugees would affect us all here in Bremen, in Germany and in Europe this summer and winter.

For us here at the *schwelle* Foundation, and for me as a Christian refugee supporter, your story and commitment bears an essential message for us as a country which offers refuge, so that we can successfully create a way of living together with those who have fled to us and with others who have been living here for longer.

We must stop treating those who come here to us as objects. Even as objects of our well-intended care. The people coming here each have their own story, their strengths and weaknesses, their beliefs and their doubts, their hopes and prejudices. It is important to create opportunities for them to express their own ideas and that we all decide together how to shape our society so that it can become a place of shared freedom and mutual respect.

You, Farah Abdi, translate for NGOs and for other refugees on Malta; you fight for your common rights, particularly for minors.

Today we honour you as the Unknown Peace Worker. However, this does not make you the perfect young hero, and I am sure that you do not wish to be seen as an “exemplary refugee”.

You work in a restaurant and as a blogger. You love music, acting, fashion, writing. You would like to achieve a qualification in International Relations and you are in the process of publishing a book about your life to date. You have as many different facets as you have interests, experiences and dreams.

I wish you all the best for your future path and may God protect you wherever you may be.

