

Kenyan peacemaker wins global prize

She has fought for harmony among clans and people of different religions

Dekha Ibrahim Abdi, a peace activist from North Eastern Province, is the winner of a global award, the 2009 Hesse Peace Prize which she received in Germany last week.

Her peace activism is long and chequered, having started the Wajir Peace Committee in the early 1990s to try and end persistent clan wars in the region.

At the time, her passion was to see peace prevail in a region where hostile clans were in a permanent war mode. It did not occur to her that the world was watching. And last week on Thursday, Ms Abdi scooped the global award that told her that her efforts were not in vain.

Wajir was under emergency law from 1963 to 1990, with government forces fighting an active guerrilla movement (the Shifita war). When the emergency and quasi-occupation ended, the security situation deteriorated. There was an open conflict which claimed 1,500 lives, and which resulted in a lot of hatred between different clans.

In 1992, Ms Abdi 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, they began to organise mediation between the

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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 and NGOs – to implement the agreement.

Ms Abdi, who had been working as coordinator for a mobile primary healthcare project for nomadic people, was elected secretary of the peace committee, hence undertaking dual roles.

The model developed in Wajir, which Ms Abdi describes 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 vi-

Kenyan peace activist Dekha Ibrahim Abdi after being awarded with the 2009 Hesse Peace Prize last week in Wiesbaden, Germany.
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olence. Ms Abdi 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 has been a central focus of Ms Abdi'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, Ms Abdi has taught in Somalia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Canada, Cambodia, Philippines, Ghana, Nigeria, the Netherlands, Zimbabwe and the UK.

Ms Abdi now lives in Mombasa and works on peace, conflict and development issues with a number of organisations. She also raises funds to support community groups in peace-building and communication infrastructure and continues to work for the Wajir community with young people to create economic development. She supports Peace Practitioners through mentoring and coaching to create a second generation of peace workers in Kenya and 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 basic mediation. She works as an adviser to the government on mediation.

Basic mediation

In 1999 Ms Abdi was awarded the Distinguished Medal for Service by Wajir DC, and in 2005 was named Kenyan Peace Builder of the Year. She was also nominated as one among 1,000 women for the Nobel Prize in 2005, now known as 1,000 Peace women across the globe.

Ms Abdi, born in Wajir in 1964, grew up in a mixed neighbourhood of different ethnic groups and religions, in which, although a Muslim, her closest childhood friends were Christian and of a different ethnic group.

At the secondary school she attended, pupils were divided along religious and ethnic lines into two camps, but Ms Abdi and her childhood 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 be in one camp or another.

It is this background which informs her philosophy of inter-religious cooperation and subsequent peace work, for she maintains that working towards positive relations between different faiths is crucial to achieving durable peace. (Agencies)