

# Return 'home' surreal after Somalia sojourn

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His first day back to work was a bit surreal.

Less than two months ago, he was prime minister of Somalia. He battled terrorists, pirates and warlords. He addressed dignitaries from the United Nations.

Now, Mohamed A. Mohamed is back at his old job at the state Department of Transportation downtown, back to his little cubicle with a window overlooking Swan Street.

A few photos of him as premier were tacked to his wall by colleagues, the only visible reminder that these last nine months weren't a dream.

"It's a different feeling when you're heading a whole nation and you come back to your normal life," Mohamed said. "It's a little awkward, to tell you the truth."

Mohamed, 49, a Somali native who resettled in Buffalo more than 20 years ago, was forced out as Somalia's prime minister in June, ending his remarkable months-long odyssey as abruptly as it began.

He returned to his job at the DOT on Thursday, as he tries to settle into his old life as civil servant, husband and father living on Grand Island.

But his heart is still with Somalia. He still grapples with what he saw, what's happening and lessons learned.

As prime minister, Mohamed pleaded with international leaders to pay closer attention to his homeland in East Africa, and now we understand why.

Somalia has been struck by the worst drought in 60 years, contributing to a famine that's sending tens of thousands of Somalis fleeing for the border.

The refugee camp in Kenya -- still occupied by Somalis from the drought 20 years ago -- has swelled to nearly 400,000 people, with more than 1,000 arriving from across the desert each day. The United Nations refugee agency described it as the worst humanitarian disaster in the world right now.

"They show up in terrible condition," said Charity Tooze, a spokeswoman for the U.N. agency based in Washington, D.C. "They have nothing. They're incredibly dehydrated and malnourished. Mothers are losing their children across the desert."

The death toll mounts. The famine has killed an estimated 29,000 children under age 5 in the last three months alone.

### **Admits being naive**

It makes Mohamed think about the kids he once visited in a Somali school.

They were boys and girls as young as 7. He shook their hands and smiled, but was struck by their malnourishment and the despair in their eyes.

"What do they look like now?" he thinks.

What happened to them?

Mohamed was as stunned as anyone when he was offered the prime minister's position last October, after a trip to the U.N. in New York City to speak with Somalia's president, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed.

He was also naive.

Mohamed hadn't been home in a quarter-century, and his country had changed so much. Somalia has not had a functioning central government since 1991, when the president was overthrown and much of this coastal nation along the Indian Ocean was thrown into lawlessness and warfare.

It was now a very dangerous place, and very complicated.

The southern part of the country, specifically, is controlled by Islamic terrorists -- al-Shabab. Pirates roam the waters. The weak and ineffective temporary government backed by the international community has been notoriously corrupt.

"When I went there," Mohamed said. "I thought there was a functioning system that only needed some adjustment here and there.

"But honestly," he said, "everywhere was dysfunction. You're starting from scratch."

There are hospitals, but little medicine.

It lacks basic services, like garbage collection.

Displaced Somalis live out of abandon buildings, and make money from whatever they sell on the street.

Everyone carries guns.

"It's kind of this post-modern, science fiction chaos," said J. Peter Pham, an expert on Somalia with the Atlantic Council, a Washington, D.C., think tank.

A sign of hope came Saturday. Reports indicated militants vacated much of the capital of Mogadishu, but it was unclear if it was for good or just a tactic.

The militants are a big part of the reason for this crisis -- not just drought.

The country is one of the most inaccessible for relief organizations, which have a history of being denied by al-Shabab or are scared off by the violence, Pham said.

At the same time, the government's legacy of infighting and pocketing foreign aid has made the international community wary of getting too deeply involved.

"It's a matter of funding," Pham said. "This is one of those things where reality hits the ground. We can't fund everything, and if anything, the debt-ceiling debate reminded us of our limits.

"Even those countries who fund Somalia have no assurances, with this so-called government, that the money is going to do any good," Pham said.

### **15-hour work days**

Mohamed worked 15-hour days running day-to-day operations from his office-apartment inside the government compound in the capital of Mogadishu. He easily dropped 20 pounds from the stress.

After his first interview with Somalia's president, he stepped outside and a bullet whizzed passed, landing two feet in front of him.

"Yeah, that's normal," said the man walking with him. "Keep walking."

The selection of the University at Buffalo graduate as prime minister drew criticism in some circles because of his lack of experience in international politics, but what qualifications prepare you for this?

He did learn politics while working on campaigns in Buffalo, but that didn't prepare him for everything. Here, conflicts might be settled by offering a patronage job. In Somalia, there are no jobs to offer.

Mohamed often questioned why he took the position. Then, he thought of those kids he met in that school. He kept a picture of them on the wall of his office to remind him.

Other photos of him can be found all over the Internet: Mohamed with the prime minister of Italy; Mohamed before the UN security council; Mohamed with the British couple he helped free from Somali pirates.

"That was a good moment," he said.

There were plenty of bad moments, too.

In June, Somalis got word of a deal to oust Mohamed and reportedly took to the streets of the capital in protest.

Mohamed was concerned the large crowd was an easy target for a terrorist bombing and asked his interior minister to talk to the people.

The cabinet member went out, stood on top of a vehicle and told the crowd to disperse. When they did, Mohamed breathed a sigh of relief.

An hour later, a suicide bomber walked right into the interior minister's home and blew him up.

The bomber was the minister's niece.

Behind the scenes there were tensions between the Somali president and the speaker of parliament.

The two adversaries were under pressure to get along or face losing financial support from the international community, so they struck a deal. Part of the pact was that Mohamed would go.

### **Clash led to ouster**

Mohamed believed Somalia was taking steps -- building an army, pushing back al-Shabab, gaining public support -- but he clashed with the speaker.

While Mohamed agreed to bow out, rather than remain part of the problem, he had a condition of his own: His deputy from Amherst would succeed him.

The new prime minister, Abdiweli M. Ali, is an economics professor at Niagara University. Mohamed trusts him. The two shared many a coffee together at Tim Hortons in Amherst and Grand Island talking about Somalia in theory.

Now, they talk about the reality by phone.

"I've known him for a long time," Mohamed said. "He's a decent guy, a professional, straightforward guy and has the same philosophy -- not to steal, be honest and do the best you can.

"But I worry about him," Mohamed said. "It's a stressful job. I'm sure he's going through a very, very tough time."

For Mohamed, this experience changed him. He was humbled, has become more appreciative.

He wants to start a nonprofit to help unite Somali communities in the United States. He won't speculate on whether he would ever run for president of Somalia, but he hasn't ruled out running for a political office in this country.

He wants to write a book about his amazing story.

On Thursday, his colleagues at the DOT gathered in a small conference room and welcomed his return with a cake.

"We all kept him in our prayers," said Janine Shepherd, who sits in the cubicle next to him.

Mohamed expressed his appreciation and said how happy he was to be back.