

From doctor's ordeal, a different view of Somalia

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(AP) -- Dr. Hawa Abdi has treated sick and wounded Somalis since 1983, through famine and civil war. But it only took one day for Islamist rebels to wreck her life's work.

And only a week for her to rediscover an older, more civil Somali society that has survived despite the horrors that have beset her east African homeland.

Speaking to The Associated Press, Abdi recalled the attack in stark detail:

It was the morning of May 5. Bullets from automatic rifles tore through the concrete walls and woven grass screens. A woman crawled away from her bed in the middle of giving birth. Another burst her stitches from a Cesarean birth as she ran, blood spilling from her body. Mothers were forced to tear IV tubes from their babies' arms as they fled into the thorny bush.

"They just started shooting," she said. "There was screaming everywhere."

The rebels smashed the four glass incubators, the only ones in Somalia. In their looting spree they pried open the metal containers of the centrifuges used for blood tests, looking for cash. They bent the doors and windows out of their frames and carried them off. Food, medicine,

equipment were stolen or destroyed. A guard and a bystander lay dead.

Abdi, 64, was imprisoned in her house, with gunmen stationed outside her bedroom door and. A black flag, the banner of the militant group Hizbul Islam, was hoisted outside.

There things may have stayed - one more brief episode in a civil war whose chaos and cruelty have lasted 20 years. But this time was different.

Abdi and her daughters are known throughout Somalia as healers and protectors who don't distinguish among clans, religions or political creeds. Abdi has offered tens of thousands of people refuge on the 400-square-kilometer (150 square-mile) farm, where she has built her hospital. So news of the attack raced through Somalia and its far-flung diaspora.

Somalia's clan system mobilized - a curse when warlords are battling for primacy, but a powerful blessing when the weak can call on their ties to the strong. Former patients began to make calls. Their friends and relatives, both inside and outside Somalia, made calls. And phones belonging to Hizbul Islam began to ring.

After a week, the leader of Hizbul Islam, Sheik Hassan Dahir Aweys - a man designated a terrorist by the U.S. State Department - ordered Abdi's release and his organization sent her a written apology.

The gunmen, who were already camped on her property before mounting the attack, were searching for food, medicines and cash. They are still in the area. Sullen teenage fighters among them told Abdi that as a woman she should not be operating the hospital.

Now, eight months later, Abdi is internationally renowned, traveling

abroad, and honored by Glamour, the U.S. magazine, as a woman of the year. She spoke to the AP in neighboring Kenya, where she is resting on her doctors' orders.

Abdi got her medical degree in the 1960s in the Soviet Union, then allied with Somalia. She became one of the country's first foreign-trained woman doctors. Then famine and civil war engulfed Somalia, and Abdi opened her farm to refugees from the fighting. She believes some 10,000 famine victims are buried on her farm.

"My mother made a lot of sacrifices and never gave up helping her people," Amina, her daughter, said as she walked through the ruins of the hospital with an Associated Press photographer recently. "I remember in 1993, when people had nothing to eat, she was selling her golden necklaces and rings to feed the hungry."

Even when the rebels moved onto her land last year, Abdi continued to work, turning aside threats with a smile or an admonishment from the Quran.

"I told them the Quran says you cannot enter someone's house without their permission and I did not give you permission to be in my house," she recalled.

Now she is slowly beginning to rebuild what was lost in the May assault, helped by her two daughters, who also are doctors and work at the hospital.

She has visited international donors to appeal for money, if only a fraction of the millions the international community spends on military support for the weak, corrupt Somali government. Some Somali expatriates are also trying to help.

Italy, once the colonial ruler of this part of Somalia, gives Abdi money to buy medicine. The U.N. World Food Program, which had suspended aid because it could not be protected, has resumed shipments, sending food for 800 malnourished children and 440 patients in Abdi's care.

The hospital lies at Afgoye, along the main road to the seaside capital of Mogadishu, a corridor that forms one of the world's largest concentrations of displaced people - more than 410,000. Their gumdrop-shaped huts are often little more than rags tied to a few sticks.

The hospital served as a focal point, distributing food, encouraging mediation in clan disputes and treating the sick. Last year, it treated more than 162,000 people and helped more than 14,000 malnourished children, according to figures provided by Doctors Without Borders, which used to support the clinic but pulled out this year.

Abdi says the hospital must now perform brutal triage to determine who is most in need of help. Where there were once 400 beds, the hospital now has only 150. It still receives more than 250 patients a day, including about 15 women a day arriving to give birth.

"We send cars out to come and pick them up but we can't take everyone," she said.

She and her daughters also run an education program for 850 children and lessons for women that include sewing and literacy. They encourage refugees camped on their land to grow vegetables. They mediate in disputes.

For women like 41-year-old Shukri Abdulkadir Mumin, the hospital is a lone bright spot in a life of misery. After her husband was paralyzed by shrapnel in fighting in the capital, the couple fled here with their seven children. The youngest, 7-month-old Maryan, has watery diarrhea, the

same condition that killed her sibling.

"My child was very ill when I came to the hospital. She could not open her eyes but now she is recovering," said Mumin, cradling her baby.

"Thanks to Allah and to the staff members at Hawa Abdi medical facility."

More information: <http://www.drhawaabdifoundation.org>

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