

Ahmad, a 22 year old Somali refugee living in Cairo

In 1995, many people lost their lives in a massacre in Badyhabo, Somalia. It was another chapter in the ongoing civil war between the various Somali clans. For Ahmad, it was the end of his peaceful family life. One of his sisters was killed and his father was abducted by the militia.

He recounts, "I was terrified of the militias. They were constantly harassing me because I am from a minor clan. Once, I was abducted for 12 days and was beaten to almost death. It was my uncle who got me out. He had to pay a ransom to the militia soldiers. But they were still after me. I used to hide from them wherever I went. My uncle decided I should leave. Six months later, he took my picture and got me a passport. I fled to Dubai, then to Egypt two years ago."

Ahmad's eyes are sad and downcast as he tries to recapture happier memories from before "the bad times of abductions, massacres, terror and death." He says wistfully, "I know that before 1990, life was very good and peaceful but I don't really remember such a time. I was too young then. All I can remember is destruction!"

Ahmad revives when the conversation turns to schooling. His father was well-educated and spoke many languages. Ahmad remembers fondly the evenings spent reading with his father.

"I went to school when we lived in Mogadishu, between 1993 and 1995. There were two peaceful years when there was no fighting and many schools were functioning. Then in 1995, all that stopped and the civil war started again.

"I loved going to school. I was happy to be learning new things. We had very good teachers. It's from them that I learned my English. The system of that school was based on the system of western schools and everything was organised. By the time I fled Somalia, no schools were open."

Like most refugee youth, Ahmad believes his future is linked to education. "I don't go to school now. I can't afford the school fees. I can barely make my living. Of course, I would like to go to school if it were possible. I need education to prepare me for a better future."

Ahmad was still a teenager when he arrived in Cairo. He was penniless and desperate for any job. For a year and a half, he worked as an errand boy for a Somali family. But as time passed by, Ahmad grew more desperate to find a better job. His language abilities helped. He speaks two different Somali languages. Ahmad now works as an interpreter and likes the opportunity to help other refugees.

Life in Cairo should look brighter for Ahmad but he says, "There are aspects of life here which I do not like. I have no privacy. I don't like being a stranger, a refugee, living with people I don't know. There are few education opportunities, few facilities to help us, the refugee youth, with our future.

"I can't go back home, not yet. The militias are still there. There is no central government, and belonging to a minor clan, I would definitely get persecuted. Even with peace established, I wouldn't be sure of being safe."