

Somali man, free from hell at last, finds it in his heart to forgive his tormentor

By WINNIE GRAHAM

Years after Yusuf Omar Al Azhari was jailed at the notorious Labatan Jiro prison, about 350km from Mogadishu, his voice still reflects desperation and pain.

The former Somali ambassador and son-in-law of the last civilian president of his country was arrested at 3 o'clock one morning while asleep. Soldiers swarmed round his house, he was woken up, blindfolded and taken to prison without knowing his crime.

Al Azhari was never brought to trial. His property were confiscated. For the next six years he was kept in isolation. He spoke to no one, and had nothing to read and very little to eat.

During his first eight months in jail he was angry, violent and depressed but refused to submit. His captors, trained in East German tactics, responded with torture. He feared he would lose his mind.

"Finally I recognised myself for what I am: just a human being. I had to look for purpose in life."

The one-time ambassador awoke from a dream and found his identity.

Al Azhari was born in Somalia and educated in Ethiopia, Sudan and the University of Mogadishu. He completed his law degree at Khartoum University when his country gained independence in 1960. When he heard the news, he returned to help with the celebrations.

It was at this time that he married the daughter of Abdirashid Ali Sharmarce, then prime minister and later head of state.

In the years to follow, he was ambassador to Nigeria, the US and several West African countries. While

he was ambassador in Washington, he studied for his LLB degree at Blackstone University, a Catholic institution.

His was a golden life but, in retrospect, he describes it as "superficial".

His release was almost as unexpected as his arrest. Major-General Mohamed Siad Barre, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces who suspended the 1960 constitution, abolished all political parties, dissolved the National Assembly and declared Somalia a socialist state with himself as chairman of the Supreme Revolutionary Council, was finally deposed in January, 1991.

Barre fled to Nigeria, where he was given asylum.

Al Azhari finally walked out of prison a free man and went in search of his family.

He found them living in a hut in Mogadishu.

"When my wife saw me with a long beard standing at the door, she fainted," he said. "She had been told I had been shot and killed trying to escape. She had no idea I had been imprisoned."

One day, while sitting in a coffee shop, he was overwhelmed by a feel-

ing that he should forgive the man who had caused him so much misery.

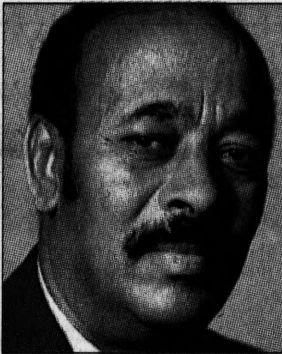
"I asked for guidance and found I could no longer resist the need to forgive," he said.

With the help of the Nigerian government, he traced Barre, then 87, and went to his home.

"He asked me why I was in Nigeria and our eyes met. I told him I had come to forgive him for what he had done to my family.

"He started to cry. For 10 or 15 minutes, he wept like a baby.

"I thanked God for letting me fill the heart of such a man with remorse," Al Azhari said.



AL AZHARI: Asked for guidance after release