

Somali man's example of how to forgive

Former diplomat was held and brutalised for six long years, but sought out and made peace with his weeping captor

By WINNIE GRAHAM

In the week the Truth and Reconciliation Commission starts work, a remarkable man has appealed to South Africans to forgive, to care for each other and to work together for the future. Dr Yusuf Omar Al Azhari, a former Somali ambassador to the United States, Nigeria and other west African states, who was kept in solitary confinement for six years, tortured and beaten, has just attended a Moral Rearmament conference in South Africa. His story is surely the ultimate example of forgiveness and reconciliation.

They came for him at 3am one day, roused him from sleep, blindfolded him, then bundled him into a small Land Rover and drove him to the notorious Labatan Jiro prison, some 350km from Mogadishu.

The former diplomat who, in his own words, once "had everything", was now tossed into a tiny cell with nothing to eat, nothing to read, no one to talk to and no news of his family.

His arrest followed some time after the assassination of his father-in-law, the last civilian president of his country, Dr Abdirashid Ali Sharmarce. It was ordered by Major-General Mohammed Siad Barre, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, the man who had assumed power, 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.

The torture started.

His Somali captors had been trained in East Germany and told him bluntly: "You have not come here as a tourist." They set out to break him. He was kept handcuffed and in complete solitude. His arms turned black and blue and there was talk of amputation. His health failed. He was just skin and bones and he thought he would be paralysed ... or worse, lose his mind.

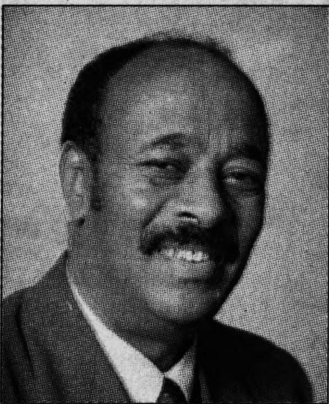
Angry, depressed and violent, he refused to submit. Finally, in despair, he - a practising Muslim - turned to intense prayer.

"My God, my God ... I said. If you are there, and I know you are, tell me what I am doing here? I did not ask you to create me. You must have made me for some purpose. I ask you to give me peace within myself."

His anguish kept him on his knees most of the night.

He did not notice the time pass. But, when he finally slept, he had come to terms with his lot. He told himself that too long he had thought himself a supernatural genius, that he was superior. Now he recognised that he was no better than the meanest soul begging for his daily bread.

"I recognised myself for what I



Dr Yusuf Omar Al Azhari ... an astonishing reconciliation act.

am: just a human being," he said. "I knew the time had come to stop thinking of the sweet life, to go beyond to where I would find true happiness. I had to look for a purpose in life."

It seemed to the one-time ambassador that he had finally awoken from a dream and found his identity. His depression evaporated. He was so composed that when his guards arrived in the morning, he could greet them as "brother". They, in turn, believed he had finally gone mad.

He started exercising daily, jogging on the spot for half an hour each morning. To occupy his mind, he debated with himself. He spent the mornings recalling all the wrongs he had done, reliving the frustration and agony. He asked

himself if he always been honest. Had he treated his wife fairly? His mother, his country? Had he hurt anyone? He was totally honest with himself.

"Sometimes I became so agitated I did not believe I was fit to live as a human," he says.

Then he would rest for an hour and a half, occupying himself with his "friends" - the cockroaches, ants and spiders which shared his cell. He grew to love all God's creatures.

In the afternoons, he devoted his thoughts to the good things he had done in his life. He did not want to become obsessed with his wrongs but even in assessing the good he was totally honest with himself. Had he always been sincere, or had his good deeds been for his own benefit?

At night he prayed. He repented of his sins. He cleansed his soul and repeatedly asked God for guidance. Six years passed.

Al Azhari walked out of prison with the guards when Siad Barre was deposed in 1991. He went in search of his family and found them living in a hut in Mogadishu. His property had been confiscated.

But Al Azhari's torment was not entirely over. He was overwhelmed by a feeling that he should forgive the man who had caused him so much misery. He brushed it aside, but the feeling returned.

With the help of the Nigerian government, he traced Barre, then 87, and went to the home the dictator had fled to in Lagos.

"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 ten or 15 minutes, he wept like a baby. Then he said 'thank you'.

"I, in turn, thanked God for letting me fill the heart of such a man with remorse. The happiness and glory I experienced then is immeasurable with material wealth."

Today, Al Azhari's wife and children live in Toronto. He, however, has refused to desert his fatherland and is doing all he can to bring opposing factions together for the common good of Somalia.