



Urtehagen International, Burao

An Eye-opening and a Life Changing Experience: Urtehagen International Orphanage Center in Burao

By Salma A. Sheikh



Ms Fosiya with the children at Urtehagen International, Burao

The Somaliland Review was, finally, able to catch with Ms Fosiya Janale, a humanitarian worker and Somaliland's own answer to Mother Theresa!

Ms Fosiya Janale is a Somaliland born with a Norwegian citizenship. She was born in a small town in Somaliland called Aynabo and left to start a new life in Norway in 1997. At the time Ms Fosiya left for Norway, she was very young and had only completed her secondary education in Aynabo.

Ms Fosiya adores her Islamic religion, and her character adorns her Somali culture. Her 23 years in Norway, where she studied and worked with other Norwegians, did not alter her instilled foundation of Somaliness and Islam; she refuses to shake hands with men, recites God's praise in every sentence she utters, and puts the needs and happiness of others before hers.

Ms Fosiya came back to her motherland, the Republic of Somaliland, in 2013 to help establish the first orphanage center, Urtehagen International, in Burao, the capital city of the Togdher region. Although the Urtehagen was founded, and funded by a Norwegian revert, Dr Ali, it is Fosiya who manages the center, since its establishment in 2013, voluntarily. Ms Fosiya is the Director of Urtehagen International Burao, and the only unpaid employee of the center. Learn all about the Urtehagen International and Ms Fosiya's vision and mission in this exclusive interview.

guardians or families?

At the beginning, we allowed the parents/guardians of these children to visit them in the center, because we wanted the children to adopt the new environment, system and the programs we set out for them. Once the children felt settled into their new lives and integrated with each other, we decided they visit their families on Thursday afternoon, spending the night with them and come back to the center on Friday afternoon. This allows the children to spend time with their siblings and other family members on that night and day. Some of them do not like to spend the night with their families, because they have very comfortable life in the center compare to where they will spend the night on that night they are with their families, but we encourage them to spend the time with their families, so they appreciate the opportunity they are given. We hope this will inspire them to do their best to be successful in life so they can help their families out in the future. They have to know who they are and where they come from, so, they work on a brighter future.

Q You are the director of the center, and you have number of employees who do different jobs such as teachers, chefs, nannies, security guards and drivers. Both are males and females. How do you ensure the safety and the wellbeing of the children at the center?

A I ensure the safety of the children in several ways. First of all, all my employees go

through an extensive interviews and checks to make sure they are safe to work with children. Only the security guards and nightshift nannies stay in the center after working hours. We pick and drop the center's employees from and at their homes. They all understand and consented the terms and conditions of their employments at Urtehagen International.

Secondly, we have security cameras all of the center and these are regularly monitored and reviewed. We have close relations with the district police, who follow on our activities closely. We have other security measures and we do all of them to ensure the safety of the children and the safety of our employees, too.

Q How does the local community in Burao contribute to the center?

A I am extremely grateful for the local community in Burao; the students, health workers, religious leaders, the business owners, all of them. Many university students and health workers volunteer their time to help us with many activities we do here. There is, constantly, someone knocking on our door asking what and how they can help. The stores owners and other business owners in Burao never turn us away if we reach them out for contributions. They all contribute to their best and that is a great attitude and a moral boosting for us, too.

I am grateful to Maaxda Mineral Water, Telesom, Dahabshiil Group, HECO, the Burao diaspora

and individuals such as Hinda Mohamed Jama, Jamal Hinwal, Dr Abdi Yassin, Engineer Farah Hussein, Saynab Yusuf Abdi Saeed, and everyone else who support the center.

Q I look at the children at Urtehagen International and I see how healthy and radiant they look. I have visited your vegetable garden, which has many nutrient vegetables and fruits. Other than maintaining the nutritional diet, how do you maintain the children's general health checks?

A The general health of the children at the center is regularly monitored thanks to Dr Suudi, the Director of Burao General Hospital, whom we have good relations with and sees the children on a regular bases. We have health workers voluntarily visiting us to check the children's' health needs. And if there is a child that feels sick or recommended for further checks, we take them to Burao General Hospital, where they get a thorough health examinations. As for the medicine prescriptions, the center buys.

Q Is the government of Somaliland or other charity organisations contributing to the finance needed to run the center?

A No. The Urtehagen International center in Burao is solely supported by Dr Ali, financially. Having said that, the Togdheer local government granted the land that the center

is built on and I thank the Burao Water Agency for providing the water to the center.

Q You have worked on this project selflessly for many years and you have put so much effort into it. What are your hopes and aspiration and what is your message for anyone reading this interview?

A I trust Allah's plans for me and for the center! At the moment I am focused on doing the job and cannot tell you what the future holds. It is not an easy job, but I am hopeful one day someone better than me will come along and do greater things for the children and for the center.

My first message is for the people of Burao and people who love to do charitable acts. Many people may not be aware of the center, but I would encourage them to support the center to expand and have more capacity to take more children in. This is a great opportunity for the orphans in Burao who feel completely hopeless to have a chance as good as those who are lucky to have their parents healthy and alive and providing for them

My second message is for the Somaliland government; these children are the future generation of this country. They need you today to become a righteous

citizens who will lead and defend their nation tomorrow. It is the government's responsibility to make sure they get what they need, therefore, we ask the

government to allocate a budget for the center to minimize any risk or the center failing.



Ms Fosiya Janale, the Director of Urtehagen International, Burao

Q Why did you relocate to Burao, Somaliland after 23 years to Oslo, Norway?

A Before I decided to move back to Somaliland, I was attending a school in Oslo, which has been established by Dr Ali Linstat, [a Norwegian revert]. Dr Ali does a lot of charity work and gives his own money to support women, children and underprivileged people through charitable projects like Urtehagen International in Burao.

Dr Ali spoke to us one day about his wish to donate to a charity organisation that supports orphans and struggling mothers. He knew about Somalia and the conflicts that left many people destitute and in dire situations, but he knew how unsafe it is to send people and funds to set up a charity organisation in Somalia. Dr Ali didn't know about the secession of the Republic of Somaliland and that it is more appropriate to set up a charity organisation in Somaliland due to its stability and security.

We, the Somaliland citizens in his school, took upon the role to inform him about Somaliland and even organised a trip for him to visit Somaliland. At the time, former president Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud Silanyo was the president of Somaliland, and both president Silanyo and his wife, Amina-Weris welcomed Dr Ali and hosted him in Somaliland.

Burao, which is the capital city of Togdheer region and Somaliland's second city, was the one of the places Dr Ali visited. Neither I nor he was expecting

the situation we have seen and the scale of the impoverished people in there. He, immediately, made a decision to support the orphans and their families in Burao. Dr Ali did not reach his decision until he met with all stakeholders whether the local government, the central government, the community elders, the business community, civil societies and members of the larger community in Burao.

After Dr Ali made his decision to fund a center for orphans in Burao, he called us upon a meeting to discuss how the project will be initiated and who is willing to take part and volunteer. All praise belong to Allah, myself and a young Norwegian lady called Maria put ourselves forward to work with Dr Ali on voluntary bases. So, the reason I relocated to Somaliland was solely to work on this charitable project.

Q Relocating to Somaliland from Norway, where you have spent more than 23 years of your life, came with a tough decision. What were the challenges you have faced moving back to Somaliland?

A The reason I came back to my homeland was to give back to the community. I knew about the dire situations of the people, particularly, the people of Togdher region. There are countless orphans and disabled people who don't get education or the care they need.

So, when Dr Ali asked for volunteers to work on this project that he was solely funding, it became personal for me and I

wanted to take part in the cause and give my time and effort to make it successful.

I was aware of the challenges I will face and these challenges included my lack of understanding of the political and social situations on the ground as well as not being familiar with local people and context since I was absent from the country for all those years I lived in Norway.

I made a promise to myself to work selflessly and give as much as I can possibly give. I knew no challenges I faced will be comparable to the daily struggles of the orphaned and disabled children from poorer families, so, I was neither concerned with possible challenges I will personally face nor was I going to be hindered by minor issues from the bigger cause I and my colleagues set out to engage in.

Also, remember! There was a non-Somali man who is willing to invest his own money in a cause that will benefit hundreds of our people and the future of our country, and the only thing he may get in return is blessings from his creator. So, my only concern was to not disappoint this good man and the children who are desperate for such assistance. I want the Ajar (rewards from Allah), too, and that is the reason I am working with zero financial gains on this project.

Q Did Dr Ali visited or had any connections with Somaliland prior to the initiating of this project?

A I do not believe Dr Ali ever

heard of Somaliland prior to the proposal of the project. When he said he would love to do a charitable act and donate his own money to a cause that benefits Muslims in Africa who need help, he didn't specify any nation or community. We recommended Somaliland and told him what the country has gone through and how they need help with many things including assistance to underprivileged families. Dr Ali googled Somaliland and he was convinced to visit the country and see the situation of the people we talked about for himself. He first visited Somaliland in 2013 for the first time in his life.

Q Urtehagen International is well invested in and has dedicated staff. I observed the center and amazed with how much work has been put in to make it a beautiful and very comfortable hostel for the children. The children, also, looked and behaved happy and loving children. How do you select the children for Urtehagen International in Burao?

A Most orphaned children are in the custody of a relative or family friend. Even abandoned children end up with a guardian in Somaliland. But most of these caregivers are struggling financially and the child or the children are, therefore, at greater risk. We search for those in dire situations; for example a single mother struggling with her children after the husband passes away and with no support in looking after the children, or an elderly grandparent

with orphaned children whom they can't provide for. Some children are recommended by the neighbors after they become concerned with how much the child is in negligence. Dr Ali, my former colleague and I went to door to door to in poorest areas in Burao to find children that needed salvaging and given an opportunity to. It is a painful process on how we pick the children for the center, but it can be rewarding for everyone at the end and we are happy to do it over and over again.

Some of the children we picked never had more than one meal a day. They spent years sleeping with empty stomachs in small huts and no prospect of going to school or getting any type of education. This is a reality for many children in Burao and its surroundings. We cannot take in every one of these children, but we advocate and fundraise for the once we can't bring into Urtehagen.

Q When did you first receive the children into Urtehagen International center and how many children did you start with?

A We brought in the first 10 children on 13th of June, 2013. We rented a big villa in Burao and that is where we first started the housing and educating of the first 10 orphans.

Q It has been eight years since 2013 when you first received the first children into the center. Where are those children today and how have

their lives changed since then?

A Those children advanced to secondary education and most of them are accepted into Burao Academy School, which is one of the best schools in Somaliland. They are taking care of these young people, because they are no longer children but are young adults. Burao Academy School is a boarding school and they shelter these young people now. The Academy promised to continue to give free scholarship to Urtehagen International children who pass their middle school exams with merits.

The rest of the Urtehagen International children, who didn't achieve required grades still receive scholarships from other private schools and get more help to succeed. Mustaqbal School is another school that provides scholarships to the children at Urtehagen International. I am grateful to both schools for their contributions and support.

Q How many children has the center received since its establishment eight years ago?

A Urtehagen International received 110 children since its establishment in Burao. 100 children were taken in to shelter them and educate them here, so the center was, and for most of them still is their home. The 10 more children are children with disabilities, and those children are not homed here, but they spend most of the days playing, learning, and resting at Urtehagen International.

Urtehagen International center



A collage of pictures of the Urtehagen International, Burao, 2021

was built in 2014 for able children, and in 2016 the sections for the children with disability and for girls only were completed and Dr Ali came to launch the extensions, too. In 2018, the center's mosque was built and as you can see Urtehagen International has its school, dormitories, kitchen and canteen, entertainment area, mosque, offices, security personal area, garden, playfield, and parking space.

Q You have both able and disable children. Some of the children do not live at Urtehagen International, but only come to study and spend time here. Why is that so?

A The able children live and study here until the school year of 5th grade. After that we send them to study at private schools such as Burao Academy and Mustaqbal schools. For children with disability, we have them delivered by Urtehagen International school bus at 8am. They eat, they play, they learn, they bath, and they nap here. But after that they go back home. We have this arrangement, because the staff at Urtehagen are not qualified to home children with disabilities. We have number of activities they do every day to keep them busy and burn energy, learn, and eat nutritional food here.

I want to add that we take only ten special needs children now, because that is what we are able to accommodate for at the moment. Burao has many more children with disabilities and from underprivileged families,

but Urtehagen International can only take ten at a time now.

At Urtehagen International, we also give chance to children in our neighborhood to attend our school. These are children who couldn't otherwise go to school due to financial difficulties. We do not charge them anything to take advantage of the center's school.

Q Tell us the routine of a normal day for the children in Urtehagen International?

A I was a nursery school teacher and taught at nurseries in Oslo for many years. So, my experience in children helped me train all of the employees at Urtehagen International and helped us write a simple and comprehensive daily routine for the children and the staff at the center.

In a normal day, children wake up at 5am in the morning. They spend first few minutes making their own beds, then they proceed to use the bathrooms and take Wudu (wash for prayer). They all pray together. After that they sit at the canteen for breakfast, and once finished their breakfast, they wash their plates, and they go back to their dorms and change to school uniforms while folding and putting their pajamas away. Then, the children spend some time reflecting on the day before with their dorm assistant. The staff have always an updated report of any developments and issues that happens inside the center, but we have a culture of talking about it together with

the children, so the children understand what happened and how it effects everyone, so, if the event was about individuals misbehaving, they all talk about the wrongs, the rights, and the consequences. We do this so we constantly learn together on how to solve problems and how to improve ourselves.

After that, children go to school and get their first break of the day at 10 to eat their snacks and rest a little bit. Then they go back in to school, and after they finish school for the day, they take Wudu for midday prayer, eat their lunches, and rest for a bit. This is the time I love to join them to spend some time with them and tell them stories and jokes that will make them laugh. This is the best time for the children and for us, the adults, too. We all enjoy this time! After that, the children get ready for the Quran classes, which they finish at 5pm. They have time to play after Quran classes and before Maqrib prayer, which is around 6.15pm; the children, during this time, go out to play in the sport field. They play football, they race each other, and they use rope jumping. They do many different activities and burn energy. Once it is Maqrab prayer time, they all go to wash themselves, pray and get ready for dinner. After that they get ready for bed at 7.30pm. That is pretty much a normal weekday at Urtehagen International.

Q Since the children at Urtehagen International center have some type of guardians, what is the visiting schedule and contact with their