

Blind refugee baby gets gift of sight



Abdi Mohamed Aftim, 2 year old blind baby, and mother Halima survived the Moyale clashes hungry and thirsty for 2 weeks in the bush. The CHEpS team discovered them during a visit to Bulla Hagar village (where they had sought refuge after being internally displaced) in April 2012, called them to the Wajir eye camp and transported them to Nairobi for specialized treatment.

On 5 April 2012 CHEpS members visited Bulla Hagar, a village far from Wajir town, to monitor water projects there. Construction of a water tank had just been completed to help the community store water from scarce rain and from water tankers coming from Wajir town weekly. A well was being dug but having reached 60 feet there was still no sign of water. While meeting community members and elders on these projects and their needs, someone alerted us to a young mother and baby standing under a tree nearby. 'She wants to meet you doctor,' a young man told us. 'She is one of the refugees who escaped the clashes in Moyale alive. She says her son is blind and wonders if you can help.' We walked over to the tree where the young refugee mother anxiously showed us her 2 year old baby boy. She said that he had poor vision which had got worse during the recent clashes when they had to run away and hide in the bush for 2 weeks. They had survived on very little food-mainly leaves in the bush, and water. The baby was malnourished and seemed to have cataracts. We took her particulars and told her we will contact her through the village chief if treatment can be arranged. We knew this would be very difficult to organize. 'I was demoralized when these people said there was little they can do and left. I prayed to Allah to open their hearts and provide means for them to provide treatment for my baby,' the mother said later.

The opportunity came after a month when CHEpS organized an eye camp in Wajir town. We sent a message to the mother to come to the camp where an eye specialist would examine and advise on treatment for the child's blindness. She managed to come to the eye camp on 2 June 2012. We examined her again with the eye specialist. Indeed, the child had congenital dense cataracts in both eyes.



Before operation



**Before operation. Cataracts (white densities)
clearly visible**

Lion's eye hospital in Nairobi was called to book and appointment. The eye specialist at the hospital Dr. Fayyaz Khan was very encouraging and agreed to examine and operate on child. The mother said she would consult the family and reply by next morning. The same evening the chief of the village came to meet us and informed us that the family had agreed and the mother and child can travel with the CHEpS team to Nairobi for treatment. The mother and child had never traveled by plane and only spoke the Somali language. She had even lost her identity card during the clashes. The chief agreed to write an official letter so that she could travel. He even accompanied the mother through the security checks at the airport to convince the airport officials.



Admitted at Lion's Eye Hospital on 3 June 2012

The CHEpS team returned to Nairobi with baby Abdi and his mother and admitted him at Lion's Eye Hospital. Dr. Fayaz Khan, the ophthalmologist examined him, diagnosed bilateral congenital cataracts, and planned to operate next Friday 8 June. The CHEpS team visited them the next day taking along gifts of blanket (it was cold here compared to the heat of Wajir), fruits, biscuits and water bottle. The mother seemed less anxious than before and was settling down in the new environment well. The baby was operated on both eyes the same week.



The second day after being operated on both eyes 9 June 2012

For two days the baby was cranky, keeping his eye tightly shut and not allowing the surgeon to examine properly. He had to be taken to the theatre for his eyes to be examined under anaesthesia. The baby's eyes were healing well. 'The baby can now see for the first time in his life!' said the mother, smiling for the first time since we met her in Bulla Hagar two months ago!



Mother Halima happy baby Abdi can now see



Baby Abdi smiling

‘I will probably never see them once they are discharged,’ said the eye specialist who operated on him. ‘So we should be sure healing is progressing well before they return to Wajir.’

On 17 June Abdinoor, a CHEpS friend from Wajir, visited them in hospital together with the CHEpS member. He managed to create a rapport with the mother, talking in Somali language which is the only language spoken by her. It was then that she opened up and told us about her experiences. ‘When they told me in Wajir that they were willing to take me and Abdi to Nairobi for operation, my relatives refused to accompany me. The people, plane, place (Nairobi) was all new to me and I was very scared. But all I wanted was for my baby to see. So I agreed. Nairobi is cold. I was very lonely at the hospital as I could not communicate with anyone. It was esp. bad at night when it was dark and there were days there was no other patient around. When this man (CHepS member) visited a few times with his (wife) and son and brought me food and blanket, I started feeling there was somebody for me here. After operation my baby can now see. He can now walk around on his own, but the floor in Nairobi is very cold so he doesn’t like to walk a lot. I had no means to get treatment for my baby but these ‘mzungu’ people came and helped us. I don’t have a daughter or camel to give this man. But I pray Allah gives him ‘jannah’ and long life.’ ‘The baby can now see well and even walks on his own to the nurse’s station for biscuits!’ said the nurse. Abdinoor decided to take the mother and baby to his home. ‘She’ll be more

comfortable. We can ensure the baby gets all the medicines, get them more warm clothes and proper food seeing that they are malnourished. I think we should not hurry sending them back. Let us be sure they are recovered. I can keep them for a few weeks if needed.’ The mother was smiling and talking all the time as Abdinoor took them home.



Bright and inquisitive eyes ready to explore the world



Nurse bidding goodbye to a star patient, 18 June 2012



With Abdinoor escorting from the hospital

After a few days Abdinoor informed me that Abdi was running around and playing with his children. He had however got used to clinging to his mother and, on gaining vision, he now had to be given confidence to move around on his own.

On Wednesday 27 June 2012 baby Abdi was given a clean bill of health by the ophthalmologist. The mother and baby then flew back to Wajir the next morning and joined their family in Bulla Hagar village the same day to continue their lives with new vision



Baby Abdi laughing and playing just before returning to their village home of Bulla Hagar in Wajir.

‘ My dream for my baby to get sight has been achieved. I have now resolved to educate him to be like these people and doctors who helped us. May Allah bless you all.’

Acknowledgement

CHEpS thanks the following for their involvement in this humanitarian work.

Beta Charitable Trust for sponsoring the surgeries at CHEpS 14th Eye Camp and expenses for Abdi’s treatment.

Dr. Fayaz Khan, ophthalmologist, and the Lion’s Eye Hospital Loresho staff who have been marvelous in taking care of the mother and child. The medical care was excellent and their service attitude was exemplary. One nurse, realizing the Nairobi weather was much cooler than the hot climate of Wajir, brought her own baby’s clothes and socks for Abdi!

Abdinoor, volunteer, who went out of his way to make the mother and baby Abdi comfortable in Nairobi till they departed and ensured they reached their village safely.

Dr. M Sheikh the Provincial Medical Officer for Northeast Province and Dr. Mohamed, the Medical Superintendent of Wajir District Hospital for their cooperation in making the 14th CHEpS Eye Camp successful. Weeks after the camp the local leaders and community still speak of the team from Nairobi who provided eye care and performed sight restoring operations for the destitute free of cost. ‘We are amazed this was totally free, there was no corruption and the poorest people were given respect and access to services. No one before has come to provide services in this manner before,’ said an elder.

The Wajir volunteers for interpreting from Somali language and preparing for the mother and child’s travel.

The Bulla Hagar chief and community members who brought the child’s plight to CHEpS’ attention, assisted and encouraged her with travel preparations.

The CHEpS team for physical and moral assistance provided to the mother and baby during the whole travel and hospitalization period.