

My Wedding Ceremony

By Mahad Mahmoud Omar

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I arrived in Turkey on July 15, 2004, from Mogadishu, Somalia. I live in Taksim. When I first moved here, I worked in a bolt factory in Istanbul. Now I work as an interpreter and intake officer at Helsinki's Refugee Legal Aid Program (RLAP). I have refugee status from the UNHCR.

In November or December of last year, I was doing intake with new clients, and Zehara came in to apply to the UN. She was also from Mogadishu. I fell in love with her and after a month I decided to propose. Finally, she accepted and in June 2007 we had our ceremony.

I did not want to have a big ceremony because of the expenses but she wanted to have a big wedding, with a reception and dancing. So we had a ceremony in Aksaray at a dü ün salonu [wedding hall].

There's an African hairdresser in Taksim so Zehara went there and had two hours of hairdressing. The ceremony was to start at 7 in the evening and we arrived at 9 or 10 at night. We got delayed because of the hair. Everyone was waiting for us.

About 100 people came to the wedding. In Aksaray, there is a large community of Somalis and they have Turkish neighbors, so when I invited the Somalis they invited their Turkish neighbors. People from RLAP came too. We had Somali, American and Turkish music and all types of dancing. It was fantastic...



Mahad Mahmoud Omar and his wife, Zehara, at their wedding.

Credit: Helsinki Citizens' Assembly - Refugee Advocacy and Support Program

In Turkey the law says you have to have a civil marriage—they don't accept a religious marriage. In Somalia, we don't go to a court or the municipality to get married. You call the sheik and on your consent he will write something, either in Somali language or Arabic. And then you write your name, your wife's name and the names of the two people witnessing the marriage, as well as the amount of dowry. Then everyone signs it.

We did this in Turkey too. There is a Sudanese sheik and he is the one who normally does this kind of marriage here. He is an asylum seeker from Sudan. Many people have gotten married by him.

However, to be legally married in Turkey, you need a passport, and you have to certify that you are single. It's very hard. If we had an embassy here, they could do that for us, but Somalis have no embassy in Turkey. In Somalia, there is nothing working. People are desperate for security, not to get a letter that says you are single.



*Mahad and Zehara watching the festivities.
Credit: Helsinki Citizens' Assembly - Refugee Advocacy and Support Program*

There are major benefits to being recognized as legally married. I was transferred to a satellite city called Burdur, while my wife lives in Istanbul. She is two months pregnant now. We can't live in the same city because we are not recognized as legally married.

We tried to go through an RLAP legal advisor who wrote a petition to the Ministry of Interior. We wrote a petition to the Istanbul police. We informed the UN that we are married, but no one I know has succeeded in getting the kind of letter you need.

My file for resettlement was admitted to the American embassy and, on October 26, I had my first interview. I'll be very happy to go to the U.S. if my case is accepted. I hope to go to university, study more, and achieve many things. I'm interested in law and sociology, the kind of work I've been involved in at RLAP. When we go to have our interview at the American embassy and they ask if we are legally married all we can say is that we are legally married according to our culture. We will see if they care.

Getting married in Turkey is a disaster – there are so many obstacles. It's your right to have a family. It's your human right. I would suggest that they make an exception for someone who is an asylum seeker who fled his country and cannot fulfill all the conditions they set. They apply the same law to us that they do to Turkish citizens. To say to us, "Only bring this and this and that and if you don't you are not eligible," is very hard. If the person cannot find what is asked of them, let them have the chance to find something else.

[Postscript: The embassy also wanted proof of Mahad's prior bachelorhood before admitting his wife. Mahad is now in San Jose awaiting her separate processing.]