

# Rebuilding a nation from the bottom up

The forgiveness factor leads people to compare a Somali peacemaker to Nelson Mandela. Nick Smith reports.

Yusuf Al-Azhari is adamant: he is not the Nelson Mandela of Somalia.

"I couldn't be Nelson Mandela," says the former diplomat who has been shot, tortured and imprisoned and is now helping to bring peace to the war-torn North African country.

"Nelson Mandela is a great man who has suffered a lot more than myself," he says relaxing in a modest Auckland flat, his temporary home during his New Zealand visit hosted by the international agency Moral Re-Armament.

Yet commentators are increasingly comparing the peacemaker from North Africa with his illustrious South African counterpart.

"The similarity might be in the forgiveness factor: [Mandela] forgave and I did the same."

What Dr Al-Azhari means is that he forgave Mohamed Siad Barre, the Marxist dictator who ruled Somalia with an iron fist for 22 years until he fled in 1991. He tracked down the dictator, who was living in a small apartment in Lagos.

The devout Muslim says that Barre wept when he offered forgiveness for Barre imprisoning him in a 3m by 4m cell for six years, suffering physical and psychological torture.

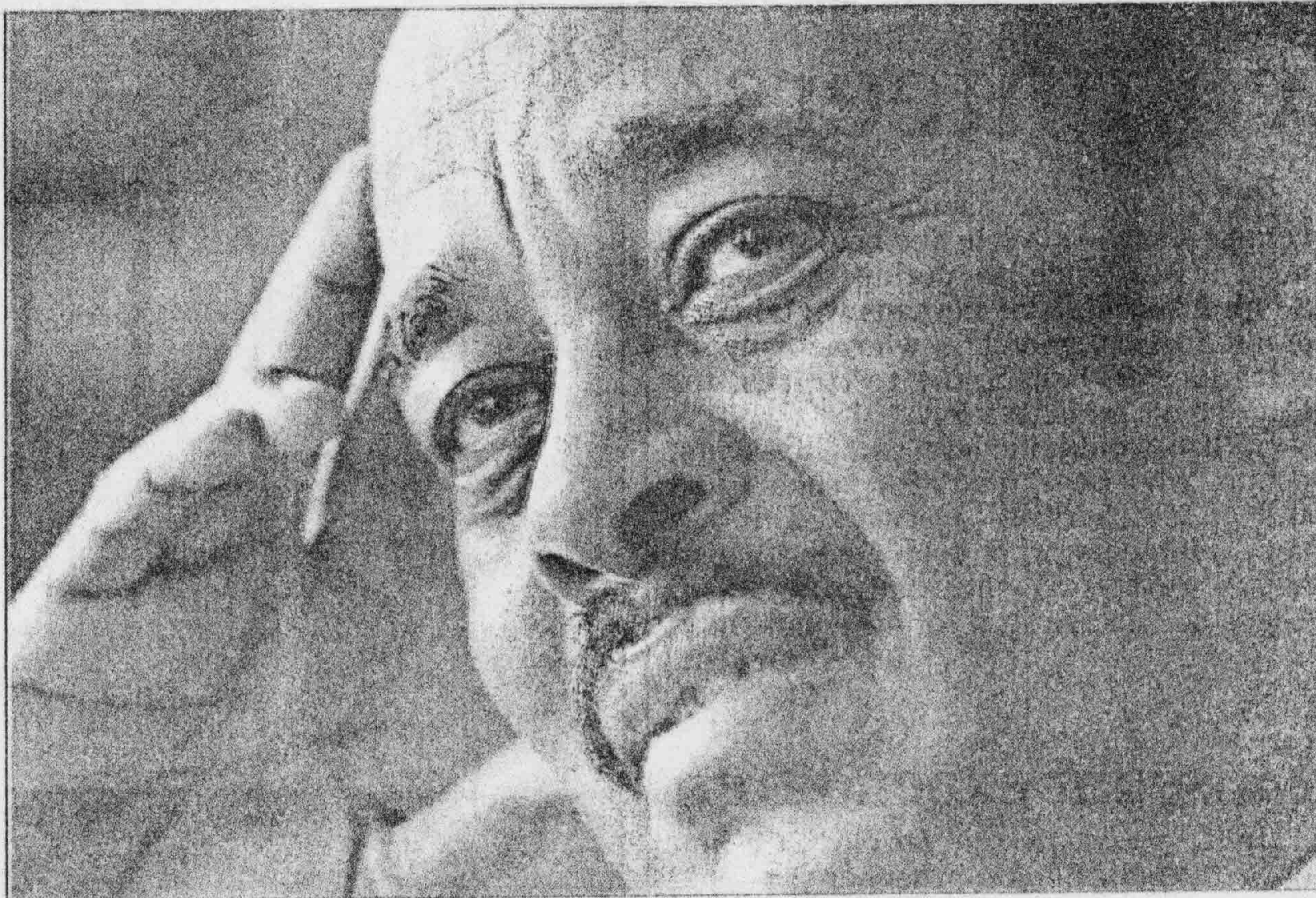
Forgiveness is increasingly being offered and accepted in the country which most Westerners have written off as a hopeless cause, a cot case beyond redemption through either United Nations aid or armed intervention.

A United Nations report last year said: "Somalia has degenerated into a black hole of anarchy in which no national government exists, and pervasive lawlessness attracts criminals and bandits."

That single sentence sums up people's impressions of Somalia but the country is undergoing a strange transformation, says Dr Al-Azhari.

It is the abandonment of Somalia by the international community that is leading to the country's rehabilitation, he says.

Instead of trying to build from the top



**HELP, PLEASE:** Dr Yusuf Al-Azhari gives thanks for past aid but says more is needed, especially basic teaching materials.

HERALD PICTURE / BRETT PHIBBS

down by imposing a national government, as numerous failed international rescue efforts attempted, Dr Al-Azhari and others worked at grass roots level bringing together traditional and religious leaders, women's groups, businessmen and intellectuals in the villages, towns and cities.

Clan grievances are being solved through mediation.

It is still a dangerous task. At one point 22 negotiators were rounded up and shot, with Dr Al-Azhari one of only three who survived. Two bullets were removed from his thigh but a third remains.

Now, provincial governments are operating in the northern region, and Dr Al-Azhari hopes to establish order in the middle and southern areas.

Dr Al-Azhari is a fascinating figure. Born in 1940 and married to the daughter of the second president of independent Somalia, he was appointed the country's ambassador to the United States.

After the coup he was ordered home, trained in Marxism in a military camp and eventually became ambassador to Nigeria and seven other West African nations.

Recalled to the capital, Mogadishu, he was arrested and spent six years in solitary confinement.

He still bears the scars from his treatment.

Utter chaos greeted him upon his release, a state of affairs that led to the ill-fated military intervention in 1993.

Yet Dr Al-Azhari says that the "failure" of the United Nations mission succeeded in stopping the worst of the civil war and

helped to create the environment where clan leaders could talk.

Having toured numerous countries, Dr Al-Azhari is in New Zealand to thank the Government and the public for support during the 1990s.

"It was extremely successful in eradicating famine and containing epidemics."

He is now asking for more help, specifically such basic teaching materials as text and exercise books, pens, pencils, blackboards, chalk and paper as a new generation start school after a decade without education.

Dr Al-Azhari also wants to speak to pharmaceutical companies about surplus medicine to treat such preventable diseases as TB, meningitis and dysentery, while he is seeking expertise to help to exploit the fishing riches that abound along the country's 3500km coastline.

About 2000 Somali migrants call New Zealand home, most of them refugees who fled the civil war.

Dr Al-Azhari has a busy schedule during his 17-day visit, including meetings with Government officials in Wellington, with the Maori Queen, Dame Te Ata, and the Race Relations Conciliator, Dr Rajen Prasad, a man he describes as one "who is aware of the problems that race creates."

He is also looking forward to tea with Sir Douglas Graham, "of whom I have a high regard for what he is doing."

"I learned a lot from him with our talk [about treaty issues] in Switzerland this year and we hope to solve our own problems as well."