



IN SCIENCE DIPLOMACY, A SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

Abeer Ahmed Qaed Ahmed is still in the early years of her career, but already her accomplishments are impressive. She grew up in Yemen, one of the world's Least Developed Countries. With support from her father and mother, she pursued studies in science. After winning a PhD Fellowship from the Organization for Women in Science for the Developing World (OWSD), she became the first foreign PhD graduate at the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Her PhD work focused on environmental sciences, enzymatic engineering and biotechnology.

Today, Ahmed is back in Yemen, where she serves as head of the Pharmacy Department and a research group director at Al Saeed University in Taiz. The country is torn by conflict. One colleague recently was shot dead just out the university.

In June 2014, Ahmed attended a science diplomacy course offered by TWAS and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. After the final session, she talked with Edward Lempinen, the TWAS public information officer, about the extraordinary journey that brought her to Trieste.

Because I am an OWSD graduate, and because TWAS has provided support to me for workshops, I like to look at the TWAS website to see news about upcoming events. When I saw a notice for this science diplomacy course, I didn't know this idea or the background. I really wanted to understand more. I applied, and I was accepted. I talked to the president of my university, and he was so supportive.

But I had great difficulties getting the visa. Because there is political instability in my country, all the embassies are closed. And this is affecting not just me, but other scientists and students who want to study abroad. But I wanted to understand: What is science diplomacy? How could I contribute in this regard?

And so I travelled to Saudi Arabia to get the visa there, and the process took me 10 days. Yes, a lot of time. It was

hard to be away from my department; every day I called to find out what was happening, and what did my students need.

Finally, the people at the Italian embassy told me: We can give you the visa Thursday at 3:30 in the afternoon. So that day I was in the embassy waiting from 11 in the morning, waiting, thinking, "Now it will come. At 3:40, they handed me the visa, and I rushed out to see if I could get a flight.

There was no flight on Thursday. And on Friday there was no flight. Also on Saturday there was no flight. So, I thought, my only option is to take the bus, even if it's a long way [almost 1,700 kilometres]. Finally I reached home on Saturday at 3 a.m. I had time only to put stuff in my luggage and rush to the airport. My flight was at 8 a.m. to go from Taiz to Sana'a, and then from Sana'a to Jordan, and from Jordan to Rome, and from Rome to Trieste.



▲ Abeer Ahmed Qaed Ahmed

I have no regret about this. Even when you're so tired because you travelled so far, you succeeded in your mission. My mission was to understand what science diplomacy is and how I can contribute. I learned so much here, and I think that when I go back, I can now do so much. You know, I am really excited.

Science diplomacy can play major roles between two or more countries and nations. It can even play a major role between two different areas in the same country... I know my people. They respect scientists. If a scientist came to talk with them, they would respect and understand.

Attending this workshop has changed my way of thinking as a scientist. Now, I understand that as a scientist I can make a difference in the world by science and also by diplomacy. ■