

From VOA Learning English, this is As It Is. I'm Christopher Cruise.

Welcome back. On the show today we look at progress in Mogadishu, Somalia and its struggles to recover from years of civil war and lawlessness. Then, we talk about girls in Uganda. A new study shows that twenty percent of them face special difficulties and danger.

The Somali city of Mogadishu is recovering from years of war. Many Somalis who left the country have returned to seek careers in business or politics. Avi Arditti reports about the experience of those returnees hoping to find success in Mogadishu.

The smell of coffee fills the air at a cafe in the newly rebuilt Makkah hotel in Mogadishu. The hotel is a meeting place for former Somali emigrants who have returned to the city.

Liban Mahti is the owner of the hotel and the small eatery.

“This is an old hotel. Not old-old, but it is from the mid-80s.”

Liban Mahti returned to Somalia from years in Canada with a plan to fix up the hotel with his family.

“During the war it got destroyed. My cousins and I and my uncle got back together and we decided to put back the business together and restart and see what we can make out of it, so here it is 25 years after the war. And it’s a good place and people come here to meet and gather, mainly, most of the ex-pats and some of the Somalis who come back from the diaspora, this is their little Starbucks and place to come to.”

Mr. Mahti is among a growing number of Somali diaspora businessmen who are bringing changes to Mogadishu. Business activity has been on the rise in the city during the past two years. The Somali capital appears to be rising from the ruins caused by 20 years of civil war.

Some local Somalis are angered by the return of members of the diaspora. They say all of the good jobs are going to returning immigrants who were educated in Europe, the United States or Canada.

“The local people see that they suffered through this and they have a sense of entitlement for jobs that come from the government or anything that can be done in Somalia. But sometimes the people with the better tools are the people who come from the Diaspora, so at the end of the day who is better for the country is the guy with the better tools to fix the situation.”

Many returning Somalis have entered politics.

Diaspora politicians make up the majority of the federal parliament. The legislature was established last year. Somalia’s current constitution requires lawmakers to have a high level of education. This is helpful for those who went to school overseas.

Hussein Arab Isse represents an area in Somaliland. He spent most of his life in California, but returned to Somalia in 2011.

“We bring what we can to add to the local culture here, whether its politics or anything else, social services, human rights, all that. There’s many issues when you live abroad, it kind of opens your mind up and you pick them up, and anything bad you leave behind, all the good stuff you bring back home and hopefully contribute.”

He says that for the most part, diaspora and locals have common interests for the country.

“I mean there are some tensions here and there when it comes to employment opportunities, but I think too much has (been) made out of it. I don’t see much problem. I think we are all Somalis and we all want our country to really experience peace and good governance, so we all share that.”

The militant group al-Shabab still carries out attacks in Mogadishu and other parts of Somalia. But the new government has held together and business development continues. People here are hopeful that Mogadishu is moving past its 20 year tragedy.

I'm Avi Arditti.

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Earlier this month, the Ugandan government and the United Nations Children's Fund released a study about an issue often ignored by the development community. The study found that more than 20 percent of Uganda's adolescent girls have what it calls "extreme vulnerability."

Uganda is the first country in the world to use the Adolescent Girls Vulnerability Index. The index measures the difficulties girls face between the ages 10 and 19.

UNICEF's David Stewart says the changing population in Uganda makes it urgent to deal with the needs of girls.

"Uganda's going through a sort of youth bulge. A very high proportion of the population is going to be young, and of productive age. One of Uganda's ambitions is to achieve middle-income status by 2040, but to do that, I think the country really needs to unleash the potential of adolescent girls."

The UNICEF official says a study of social programs in Uganda found that very little is being done to help young adolescents.

“There tends to be a focus on younger children, and then on youth. But this 10 to 14 year age group, which is such a crucial part of an adolescent girl’s life often doesn’t receive the focus that it should. It sort of gets lost between childhood and youth.”

The index will be redone every few years. It measures things like education, poverty levels, and rates of early marriage and pregnancy. But it also considers the situations of older women in the community. The women will serve as examples to adolescent girls.

The study shows sharp differences from one part of Uganda to the next. Mondo Kyateka is a youth development specialist at the Ugandan Ministry of Gender. He says the index will help in making policy.

“We are thinking that with this index, it will inform government to say, ‘OK, we are sitting on a time bomb, we need to invest in these children.’ And the gains that are likely to accrue from this investment are likely to be very significant in terms of economic growth, in terms of social issues.”

He adds that adolescent girls can play an important part in breaking the cycle of poverty.

“We know that when we empower the girl child, then we are empowering communities. Then we are addressing a lot of other issues, like issues of nutrition, like issues of early childhood marriages, early childhood pregnancy.”

But Vivian Kukunda says many of the difficulties girls face are created by the boys and men around them. Ms. Kukunda works for the Girl Child Network a non-profit organization based in Kampala. She says to fix the problems faced by girls you must also work with boys.

“We are working with them and we are empowering them, but who is empowering the boys? If they fix the whole issue of the boys it will also help the girls, because they will stop oppressing the girls. No one is telling them, ‘you need to be a good man, you need to be this and do that.’ They don’t have that.”

For now, UNICEF has no plans to extend the index to the rest of the world. But, official David Stewart says the information is already there for other African countries. It only needs to be examined to help spread efforts to empower adolescent girls.

And that’s As It Is for today. I’m Christopher Cruise. Thanks for joining us.

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