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Abdurashid Ali, a 2005 graduate of Minneapolis Community and Technical College, is leading a partnership with Puntland State University in Somalia and his alma mater in Minnesota.

Minnesota, Somali schools find sisterhood

- The relatively peaceful Puntland region offers hope for a MCTC-Somalia arrangement.

By MARY JANE SMETANKA
smetan@startribune.com

Somalia and Minneapolis seem worlds apart. War-torn Somalia is one of the poorest countries in the world, a hot land of mostly arid plains where farmers raise goats, sheep and camels and trees yield such exotica as frankincense and myrrh.

But to Abdurashid Ali, the 8,200 miles that separate Minnesota and his homeland are no barrier to building closer ties. The 2005 graduate of Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) is the driving force behind a budding partnership between that school and Puntland State University, a young college in one of Somalia's more peaceful regions.

Ali and a contingent from Minneapolis, including an MCTC faculty member, left Saturday for a two week visit to the Puntland region. They took with them donated scholarship money that will fully pay the \$300 annual cost of attending Puntland State for 30 students. That's a big deal in a country that in 2002 had a per capita income of \$226 a year, according to the World Bank.

The hope is that when the situation in Somalia grows more stable, the ties between MCTC and Puntland will grow into a fuller relationship that includes student and faculty exchanges. Minnesota has the nation's largest Somali population.

Some Puntland State officials have already visited Minnesota. MCTC officials credit Ali, 45, with nurturing a connection between the two colleges.

Colleges continues: Activism began with a book drive. **B5** ▶

MCTC, Somali school find connection

◀ COLLEGES FROM B1

Ali is an employment counselor and a cofounder of Somali Family Services, a group that aims to improve access to health care, social services and education among Somali immigrants and to increase the ties between immigrants and Minnesotans.

"This really grew out of extraordinary work by Abdurashid," MCTC President Phil Davis said. "He had been a leader here among Somali students and he was very active in trying to build a bridge between Minnesota and the Puntland region in particular."

Ali, who emigrated in 1997, calls the sister relationship between the colleges a natural.

"My goal is long term, not today or tomorrow," he said. "I'm looking to the next 20 to 30 years and what will the relationship be with Somalia and Minnesota."

"Somalia has been at war for almost 15 years ... A lot of Minnesotans, maybe they don't know what's happened. If they see the situation in Somalia they will understand better."

Ali's activism began at MCTC with a successful

◀ I'M LOOKING TO THE NEXT 20 TO 30 YEARS

AND WHAT WILL THE RELATIONSHIP BE WITH SOMALIA AND MINNESOTA. ▶

Abdurashid Ali, the driving force behind a budding partnership between Minneapolis Community and Technical College and Puntland State University

drive to collect 40,000-plus books for libraries in Somalia. MCTC, which last fall had 7,675 students, enrolls an estimated 300 to 350 Somalis each semester. Officials say that is more than any Minnesota college, and, they believe, the highest of any U.S. college.

That makes the school a natural for a partnership with Puntland State, which opened in 1999 in Garowe, the capital city of the Puntland region. Puntland, in northeast Somalia, declared its autonomy in 1998. Though it does not want to separate from Somalia, Puntland operates independently and, unlike other parts of the country, has a functioning government.

Puntland State opened as a business college for women and rapidly expanded. It enrolls about 300 students in business, government and journalism, and is one of six African universities that have

united to start an online university. The college's website shows a campus of low-slung white buildings with red roofs in a desert landscape.

Warnings complicate trip

Lena Jones, an MCTC political science faculty member and a board member of Somali Family Services, is one of five people in the delegation led by Ali, whom she met when he took one of her courses. With Somalia on the State Department's list of nations with travel warnings, MCTC isn't sending an official representative. Jones is traveling as a private citizen. She is excited about the trip but admits to some nervousness, too.

"One motivation to take this trip is to understand better what's happening in Somalia," she said. "I would love to see what the university is doing and explore possible future links between our stu-

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dents and their students, our faculty and their faculty, and perhaps explore ways of sharing skill and ideas."

Ali grew up in the southern half of Somalia but his family's roots go back at least four generations in Puntland. He hopes the trip will build not only educational ties between Minnesota and his homeland but emotional ones as well. MCTC has raised about \$13,000 so far for scholarships in Somalia, most of it with a grant from Moneygram International in St. Louis Park. MCTC wants to raise enough money to put all 30 students through school for four years.

It's a worthy goal, said Jones.

"If MCTC could have some sort of role in helping building an effective education system [in Somalia], that's huge," she said. "And if we could establish a relationship, how that can enrich the learning of students and faculty members as well. I think the possibilities are endless."

Mary Jane Smetanka • 612-673-7380