Minnesota, Somali schools find sisterhood

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

Somalia and Minneapolis seem worlds apart. War-ravaged 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 2003 graduate of Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) is the driving force behind a budding partnership between that school and Punland 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 Punland region. They took with them donated scholarship money that will fully pay the $330 annual cost of attending Punland State for 30 students. That's a big deal in a country that in 2002 had a per capita income of $230 a year, according to the World Bank.

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

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

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dents and their students, our faculty and their faculty, and perhaps explore ways of sharing skill and ideas." All grew up in the southern half of Somalia but his family's roots go back at least four generations in Punland. He hopes the trip will build not only educational ties between Minnesota and Somalia, but most of it with a grant from Moneymark International in St. Louis Park, MCTC wants to raise enough money to put all 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."