

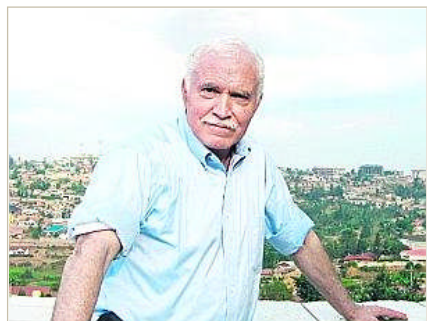
The Straits Times

www.straitstimes.com

Dec 12, 2009

THE NEW RWANDANS

American volunteer chairman, CEO



Trader-adventurer Joe Ritchie, 62, is a volunteer chairman and chief executive of the Rwanda Development Board where he helped the country move up 76 places in the World Bank's Doing Business rankings. -- ST PHOTO: LEE SIEW HUA

WEALTHY Chicago trader and adventurer Joe Ritchie, 62, is a new Rwandan. He became a citizen three years ago, convinced that Rwanda was on the rise.

For the past year, he has volunteered as chairman and chief executive of the Rwanda Development Board.

He styles the agency as a 'nimble hit squad' to capture opportunities and propel the economy.

In that role, Mr Ritchie has set his eyes on Singapore. It is now a partner in Rwanda's workforce development, civil aviation, city planning and social security system.

'I didn't realise how sensational Singapore was,' he says. His ideal is to extend the partnership to more realms as Rwanda rebuilds itself after the 1994 genocide.

This country has not left Mr Ritchie's radar since he sent his daughter, one of his 10 children, to work in an orphanage here with a bishop several years ago.

Observing little Rwanda, he began to think it was turning into an exemplar for all of Africa. 'It is successfully tackling the problems that have plagued Africa for so long, and winning,' he remarks.

The nation has an exceptional leader in President Paul Kagame, with his ambition, zero tolerance for corruption, and quest to build the country on moral foundations, he says.

'You need character and leadership. Nothing else works. Rwanda is becoming a leader by example,' he says.

Mr Ritchie - founder of Chicago Research and Trading, once the world's largest trader of options - formed a Friends of Rwanda group around 2003. He has been telling the Rwanda story to American chief executives since.

In a report titled Why CEOs Love Rwanda, Fortune magazine in 2007 said he helped link Starbucks, Google and Costco to Rwanda, which is building a business-friendly reputation.

Notably, the World Bank in September singled out Rwanda as the top reformer in its Doing Business rankings. Mr Ritchie has a role in that accolade.

Rwanda jumped 76 spots to No. 67 for improving the ease of doing business. It slashed red tape to start a business, for starters, and simplified tax payments.

Says Mr Ritchie: 'The first week I got here, we set out to move up the business rankings. We set a world record when we moved up 76 places.'

Sensing opportunity, recent arrivals in Rwanda now include Ericsson of Sweden. In September, he met 'big players from Saudi Arabia' who hope to invest in energy and real estate.

While he is a dual citizen of America and Rwanda, he feels 'very Rwandan'.

'I feel like it's my country. I feel that in a lot of ways, even more than I feel about the United States. I have a much bigger emotional stake here,' he says. 'The US is sort of going downhill. Rwanda is at least going up.'

Rwanda is an adventure for the colourful American, who spent part of his childhood in Afghanistan. He and his brother financed Afghan rebels when they tried to overthrow the Taliban in the 1990s.

He broke a transcontinental turboprop aircraft speed record with the late Steve Fossett - best known as a solo round-the-world balloonist - when they traversed America in a private plane in 2003.

He calls his six-year sojourn in Rwanda a dream situation. Parlaying his experience of war and sports to signify the scale of his newest adventure here, he recalls: 'When I met President Kagame, I enlisted in his army. This is a team you are lucky to play in. It's an adventure. You can't deny that it's fun and exciting.'

LEE SIEW HUA

