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THE NEW RWANDANS

Eager to rebuild their homeland



Mr Harorimana is planning to move his family from London to Kigali. -- ST PHOTO: LEE SIEW HUA

HIS baby girl was born while Mr Deogratias Harorimana, 37, was in Singapore on a trip to discuss Rwanda's manpower needs in April.

'Shall I go back?' the senior official asked his wife. But she responded: 'Work is more important. Rwanda is bigger than me and my family.' Her only request: 'Just keep your phone on.'

Their sacrifice is one personal facet of a national quest to rebuild Rwanda after genocide. Mr Harorimana is the deputy chief executive of the Rwanda Development Board, where he manages human capital and institutional development.

He lived for many years in Britain and is one face of the diaspora, which is returning home with talent and zeal to see Rwanda succeed. While pursuing a PhD in knowledge management at Southampton Solent University, he led a firm hosting conferences. Then came the official invitation from Rwanda to return home.

'Our President is very keen to involve the diaspora in development. As long as you have talent and are intelligent and capable, they will get you,' he says. 'You also feel...a responsibility to the country.'

The active diaspora network started the One Dollar Campaign. Some 20,000 overseas Rwandans have collected about two billion Rwandan francs (\$4.9 million) for genocide survivors since December last year.

The diaspora also hosts annual dialogues with the government. 'We debate new ideas,' he says. 'The attitude is that Rwandan strength comes from all directions, including those who criticise you.'

Officials will probe the diaspora, asking: 'What are we doing wrong?' President Paul Kagame also frankly discusses Rwanda's weaknesses with investors.

This is an inspiring leader who has opened doors to health care, education and justice, Mr Harorimana adds. 'The moment you talk to him, you realise it's your duty to get Rwanda out of poverty.'

The President also wants to learn from Singapore's success and Mr Harorimana is carrying out a piece of that mandate by upgrading manpower.

He says: 'Countries that have invested in people have done very well.'

In that respect, Singapore is the trusted principal partner. 'Its model has every element - workforce development, public service reform, social security, airport. It's a very strong partner we can trust.'

It is also a partner he is personally bonding with. One night, making a surprise appearance at a dinner table of Singaporeans who were relishing Rwandan barbecue, he sings out: 'Makan!'

With that, he breaks the ice and makes a spot-on observation of our love for food.

He has also closely observed the links between polytechnics and industry in the Republic. 'You may be in a classroom, but it is as though you are in the workplace.'

That integration spins off next-generation products, he notices. That Singapore has put much money into training facilities also impresses him.

Certainly, Singapore and the rising Rwanda animate him. That does not mean he ignores constraints.

'If you have worked in a dynamic organisation elsewhere, you get frustrated with the slower pace in Rwanda,' he says. 'You take time to explain basics.'

However, he adds: 'People in the diaspora are more passionate about development than making money.'

He has asked himself this: 'Is Rwanda a place where I want to make my future?'

Yes, he has decided. He is planning for his wife and three daughters, still living in London, to join him in the capital Kigali in a few month.

LEE SIEW HUA

