

Nigerians From Diaspora Heading Home

By Sophie Mongalvy

LAGOS, Nigeria, July 2 (AFP) – Many Nigerian professionals who grew up, studied and worked abroad are returning to career opportunities back home in a trend that has gathered pace with the global economic crisis.

And some specialists say now-democratic Nigeria, still battling corruption, crime and pockets of armed militancy, will reap the benefits.

Yvonne Emordi-Njideka, 37, made the jump eight months ago. With a background in Silicon Valley then in financial products in San Francisco she walked into a strategic development job at the Nigerian Stock Exchange.

Even though the economic crisis has had an impact on Nigeria's economy "the opportunities are here for sure," said the tall, slim woman sipping tea in a Lagos boutique hotel and sounding and looking like an American executive.



After a childhood in Ghana, secondary school in Switzerland and 20 years in the United States, Yvonne -- who said she was tired of US politics -- settled in Lagos. She wanted to be closer to her now-widowed mother and scout the job market.

It was a radical change, and not an easy one initially. In this megacity of 15 to 18 million people, she had to get used to regular power cuts, crime and water shortages.

"We've just changed some of our water tanks .. In the US you don't think about water tanks, the city supplies you with water!" she exclaimed. "It's been quite an adjustment."

Yet she does not regret her choice.

"Now that everything is falling into place, I am happy I moved back. A lot of my friends in the US don't have jobs anymore. When it comes to your career or earning a living, I am a lot better off here right now for sure".

An estimated eight million Nigerians have settled abroad, with more than three million in the US alone and many others in Europe, notably Britain, said Adike Dabiri-Erewa, who heads the House of Representatives standing Committee on the Diaspora.

Though she gave no figure, she said the number of "repats", as the returnees are called, has been on the rise for the past four years.

"Some see there are also opportunities in this country and that not everything is the way it has been depicted," she said.

Accountant Olly Olateru-Olagbegi, who left Nigeria at eight years old, came back after 24 years in Britain.

Following long years of military rule, Nigeria, a major oil producer where a large section of the population is unemployed, now has a democratic government and has reached a level of development and stability that makes coming home a viable option for young graduates from the diaspora, he said.

Last November, Olateru-Olagbegi left the comfort of his London existence and a job in venture capital to try his luck in his homeland, quickly landing a job with a private equity company.

Nigeria "still has a long way to go" but the signs of change are clear, he said, "from tiny things like traffic lights to ... the level of foreign direct investment".

Moving back has been "by no means a stroll in the park, there are a lot of problems here, like the electricity for example. But this was giving me an opportunity to be part in something that is happening," he told AFP.

Ade Odutola, who heads WazobiaJobs.com, a recruitment website, estimates that thousands of Nigerians with significant professional experience abroad have returned home over the past five years.

Both he and Dabiri-Erewa said the global financial crisis, with mass layoffs and lack of job security, has heightened the trend in the past year or so.

Some "repats" are looking for a career boost, knowing it will be easier to get top jobs in Nigeria with their qualifications and experience, according to Odutola. These can be found mainly in banking, oil and gas, telecommunications and the public sector.

"Several companies in Nigeria have returnees in key strategic positions," he said. And while many "repats" may not make as much as they would abroad, "most feel the quality of life is better because the average cost of living is less."

Advantages go both ways, noted Odutola. Not only do "repats" cost less than expatriates for Nigerian firms, but "Nigerian businesses are benefitting tremendously from the knowledge and experience of these returnees in the form of international best practices, revenue generating ideas, etc."

The "repats" are also injecting a new entrepreneurial spirit into the country, he said.

"There are lots of things that we have access to or exposure to overseas that you don't have here. With the rising middle class and a lot of people coming back," there are a lot of investment opportunities, said Emordi-Njideka.

One who spotted a niche is Temi Ogunsanya, 30. After living most of her life in Britain and working in law and public relations, she set up a line of fashion accessories when she saw that top-of-the-range handbags from abroad were selling in Nigeria but there was "a gap in the market for anything made in Africa, using African materials".

"That's what encouraged me to come," said Ogunsanya, who now lives between Lagos and San Francisco where she also sells her Nigerian-made products.

Though her start-up has been a success in Nigeria, she has no plans to move back full-time thanks to what she calls never-ending logistical challenges of everyday life in Lagos.

"California is great because it's a very easy way of life ... and I love Nigeria because it's home," she said. (END/2009)

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