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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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October 4, 2013

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Business professor uses knowledge to help rebuild Somalia

KOKOMO, Ind. — Yusuf Nur demonstrates what his Indiana University Kokomo students can do with a business degree, using his expertise to rebuild his homeland.

Nur, assistant professor of international business, travels home to Somalia during his summer and winter breaks to teach business management principles to its leaders. Recently, Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud invited him to lead a session on resource sharing at a five-day conference about issues that country faces as it rebuilds from years of civil war.

Nur said in the past, this kind of conference would have been held outside of Somalia, and likely sponsored by a non-government agency, so just being able to host it was a big step forward.

“This is the first time the Somali government has had the initiative and the money to put something like this together in Mogadishu,” he said. “This is something most countries take for granted, but it is a sign of progress for Somalia.”

At IU Kokomo, Nur said when many of his students hear about Somalia, they think only of pirates. He educates them to read further, to see what else is happening.

“There has been huge progress since 2006,” he said. “There are a lot of positive things happening.”

Erv Boschmann, interim dean of the School of Business, said Nur shares his insights and research on international business, especially about Somalia, with his fellow faculty and with students.

“The students benefit enormously from his experience, especially when he talks about international business,” Boschmann said. “I am amazed by his knowledge. Not only is he widely read, but he has accumulated a good dose of wisdom.”

Nur left Somalia, which is in the Horn of Africa, 28 years ago, to earn a Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.) degree, using a World Bank scholarship. He then earned a Ph.D. from IU. Civil war broke out shortly after he left, and it was more than 20 years before he could safely return home.

The first trip back was shocking.

“Civil war destroyed the country,” he said. “When I left, it was so peaceful. Mogadishu was a beautiful coastal town. We used to play soccer on the beach. It’s horrible what happened to the country. I convinced myself I could make a difference with the knowledge I gained in the United States.”

He said it is critical for people like himself, who were educated outside Somalia, to come back and help their homeland recover from the war.

“The civil war caused a huge brain drain,” Nur said. “Anyone with experience and education left the country. They don’t have the education to do anything. Their business leaders don’t have the theoretical background we have here.”

During his visits each year, Nur consults with businesses, educating executives on how to run a business strategically — which is also what he teaches at IU Kokomo. He has also consulted with the United Nations on developing policy for the country, and sometimes teaches classes at a college founded by the president.

His brother, Mohamoud Ahmed Nur, also was educated outside of Somalia, and is now mayor of Mogadishu, the capitol.

Nur said despite everything that has happened in his country since he left it, he still feels at home there.

“I lived in Somalia for 20 years, and I’ve lived in the United States 28 years, but when I get there, I feel at peace,” he said. “Even though the country was destroyed, I feel tranquil there.”

Indiana University Kokomo serves north central Indiana.

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