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## Long in diaspora, Armenians return home

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YEREVAN, Armenia: What would prompt a young family to abandon a comfortable life and move to a poor country where running water is still a luxury for many, politics are messy and the threat of war looms large?

For Aline Masrlian, 41, her husband, Gevork Sarian, and their two children, it was their motherland calling.

"It is something special when you live in your own land," said Masrlian, who moved here after her family had lived for generations in Syria.

Lured by the economic opportunities in a fast changing country and the lure of home, some people from Armenia's vast diaspora are moving to the land that their ancestors had long kept alive as little more than an idea. Longtime residents, meanwhile, are no longer fleeing the country in large numbers.

While 3.2 million people live in this landlocked Caucasus mountain nation - the smallest of the ex-Soviet republics - an estimated 5.7 million Armenians reside abroad. The largest disappears are in Russia (2 million), the United States (1.4 million), Georgia (460,000) and France (450,000), according to government data.

Most of the diaspora, like Masrlian's family, are descendants of those who fled the killings of up to 1.5 million Armenians in Ottoman Turkey during World War I - a tragedy Armenia wants to be recognized as genocide but modern Turkey insists was an inherent part of the war's violence.

Much later, others ran away from the economic collapse that Armenia suffered following the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union, when electricity was available only several hours a day, people had to chop down trees for heat, and bread and butter were strictly rationed.

The devastating conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, in which over 30,000 people have died, compounded the exodus. An estimated 500,000 people left the country in 1992-94, many heading to Russia.

However, over the past four years Armenia has registered an overall population inflow of 33,200, the first positive trend since gaining independence in 1991 with the Soviet collapse, said Vahan Bakhshetian, a migration expert with the Territorial Management Ministry. While it's difficult to tell how many Armenians are returning permanently, Bakhshetian said the trend offers hope.

"We are now seeing many of those who had left return," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Vladimir Karapetian.

Among the returnees are many from the Russian diaspora. Some are lured back by economic improvements here, while others are escaping growing xenophobia in Russia, where attacks on dark-skinned people from the Caucasus are frequent.

Garik Hayrapetyan of the United Nations' Population Fund said Armenians also are no longer leaving in large numbers, but he cautioned that the emerging repatriation will not be sustained without economic and political progress.

For many, the country's biggest asset is its rich cultural heritage. Two millennia ago, Armenia was a vast kingdom stretching between the Black and Caspian seas. Eventually it was divided and absorbed by bigger states, including the Ottoman empire and czarist Russia, and later the Soviet Union.

Armenians like to brag that Noah's Ark came to rest in their country, on the biblical Mount Ararat - though the snowcapped mountain is now part of Turkey, overlooking Yerevan. The country is said to be the first state to adopt Christianity as its religion.

Still, in many ways Armenia remains an unlikely place to attract returnees. Despite economic progress in recent years, over a quarter of the population lives in poverty and the average monthly wage is a meager \$275.

Outside aid is crucial. Diaspora Armenians send millions of dollars for investment and aid projects, and much of the population survives on individual money transfers from relatives abroad. The International Monetary Fund estimates that remittances make up 10 percent of the country's economy.

Those sending money are moved by the same love of country that draws Armenians back. James Tufenkian, an Armenian-American, has invested some \$30 million in reviving the traditional carpet industry - largely destroyed in the Soviet era - building hotels and running charity efforts. Today, he provides jobs to over 1,000 people here.

Tufenkian, 47, said he decided to help after his first visit at the height of Armenia's economic decline in the early 1990s.

"I felt like I had a chance to do something to improve people's lives, that it was my homeland calling," Tufenkian said in a telephone interview from New York.

Today, Yerevan is slowly transforming itself from a run-down city into a vibrant, modern capital. The downtown boasts Western boutiques, expensive restaurants and young people in trendy outfits.

Yet the rest of the city, perched on steep hills, is a bleak mix of Soviet-era concrete apartment blocks and dilapidated two- and three-story houses with laundry hanging on balconies. The air is heavily polluted, mostly from the exhaust of the battered Soviet-era cars that clog the city. Some districts in Yerevan continue to have shortages of running water, which were common in the 1990s.

While Armenia is considered one of the freer countries among post-Soviet republics, its fragile hold on democracy became apparent earlier this year. Eight people were killed in clashes between government forces and opposition activists protesting election results. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict also keeps tensions high.

But ask Gevorg Sarian about life in Armenia, and the emigre who returned from Syria with his wife and children talks more about finding a homeland than about the wider political climate.

The bearded, smiling Sarian attended university in Yerevan in the early 1980s and said he always wanted to return. The family moved back in 1998, and he started several successful businesses, including a lingerie store run by his wife.

Now 46, Sarian said he had felt separated from his Syrian neighbors. "Even if they look at you in a good way, you are still a stranger - this is the feeling of Armenian diaspora everywhere," he said.

His 15-year-old son Ardag added that in Armenia "you feel that it is your country."

Repatriation wasn't as easy for Aline Masrlian, the wife in the family. She recalled a middle-class life in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo, with running water available 24 hours a day and the markets full of fruits and vegetables. In Yerevan, when the family first arrived, water was on just two hours a day, sometimes the only bread she could find was stale, and she missed the job she had loved, as a construction engineer.

But 10 years later, sitting in a new, spacious apartment decorated with family photos, Aline said she has no regrets. "I decided that this is my country."

More recent returnee Zorair Atabekian, 36, hopes for a similar future. He came back in 2005 after five years in Canada, homesick and hoping to go into business. Though he still earns far less selling jewelry in Yerevan than he did running an apartment design firm in Montreal, he said he knew his decision would eventually prove right.

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