

Georgia opens door to African trade

Organizations hope to foster stronger ties

By SHELIA M. POOLE
spoole@ajc.com

Walter Dean has two views of Africa.

One is through the lens of a philanthropist. Dean, president of the Atlanta Committee for CARE, the aid organization, has funded a medical clinic, a girls' dormitory and new wells and sanitation systems in several Kenyan villages. It was only after bouts with malaria and typhoid that he returned to the United States.

The other view is that of a businessman. Dean, owner of Alpharetta-based Dean Machinery International Inc., is working with a Georgia manufacturer, Tecomate Wildlife Systems Ltd., to sell a modified plow called the Plotmaster, which he hopes will help African farmers become more self-sufficient. Of late, visitors to his office have included the agricultural minister and a trade delegation from Nigeria and the Malian ambassador to the United States.

"I felt my work was unfinished," said Dean, who once taught at the Ekambuli Secondary School in Kenya. "I vowed that once I was stable in the U.S., I would use my business as a vehicle to continue some development work on a private basis."

Like many other Georgians, Dean has his business eye on Africa. Already, a number of Georgia businesses are involved in the continent, ranging from small companies such as Gems of Africa Gallery on North Highland Avenue in Atlanta, which sells African arts and crafts, to giants



JOHN AMIS / Special

Walter Dean (in shirt), owner of Dean Machinery International in Alpharetta, demonstrates a plow attachment to Malian Ambassador Abdoulaye Diop (rear) as Mamounou Toure (left) and Vincent Farley help hold it.

such the Coca-Cola Co., which, along with its bottlers, is the largest private employer in Africa.

Recently, Nell Naye Diallo — who has lived and worked in several African nations — launched the African Business Council, an umbrella chamber of commerce that promotes business ties between African nations and the United States.

Her organization joins, among others, the East Africa-American

Business Council, which was formed in 1999 to foster trade and investment between the United States and the East African nations of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. Last year, the council along with the University of Georgia received a federal grant to take a trade mission to Kenya largely to look at ways to develop partnerships with Kenyan businesses under the federal African Growth and Opportunity Act.

There are also efforts under way to form a Malian chamber of commerce in Georgia.

The interest comes as Georgia's exports to Africa are on the rise. According to the Georgia Department of Economic Development, exports to Africa reached \$368 million in 2004, up from \$235.9 million the year before.

"Africa presents another option to doing business, especially as China

becomes a major force in the textile area," said Stephen Seda, executive director of the business council.

He said some investors may be put off by reports of corruption, conflict and the ravages of HIV/AIDS. But, he emphasized, Africa is made up of more than 50 nations, many of them rich in natural resources. Nigeria has oil. Mali is one of the world's largest cotton and gold producers. Sierra Leone is rich in diamonds. Kenya is known for its coffee and flowers.

During a recent visit to Atlanta from Washington, Mali's ambassador to the United States, Abdoulaye Diop, met with businesses and members of a Georgia commission formed to promote the African Growth and Opportunity Act. The commission, which hosted the event along with Emory University, and sat in on a class on economic development in Africa at Emory. The class, taught by Sam Cherribi, is examining ways to help boost the African nation's economy. Cherribi and 24 students and staffers plan to go to Mali this month to meet with entrepreneurs and government officials, visit plants and test their theories on development.

The Georgia commission was formed to promote the African Growth and Opportunity Act, which Congress passed in 2000 to provide the goods of selected countries in Africa access to U.S. markets.

Diop said his country is seeking investors and partners in agribusiness, including crops and livestock. He said Georgia, in particular, could be an interesting partner to help develop Mali's poultry industry. Georgia is one of the world's largest poultry producers.

"We are looking at building economic ties and stronger private initiatives," Diop said. "We need the support of the government of Mali and the state of Georgia too."