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# Fearing the Tide in West Point, a Slum Already Swamped With Worry

By CLAIR MacDOUGALL MARCH 15, 2016

MONROVIA, Liberia — Under the parching Liberian sun, men with jerrycans jockeyed for a prime position in front of a single faucet.

The main reservoir in West Point, the largest slum in Monrovia, had dried up several days before, as had the income of the town's water carriers. But on a recent morning, water began to drizzle from the tap, and tempers were fraying.

“Draw your water and move from here!” one man yelled.

“You always want to be first!” said Adolphus Darwon, who has been carrying water in West Point for 20 years. “I haven't drawn one gallon yet.”

Mr. Darwon, 41, furrowed his brow.

Born and raised in West Point, a seaside slum with an estimated 75,000 residents, Mr. Darwon spends his days pushing wheelbarrows through the narrow alleyways that run between rows of rusty zinc shacks.

His labor earns him about \$7 a day, most of which he sends to his 16-year-old son in a rural town in northern Liberia. Much of the rest he spends on heroin, which he says gets him through the day.

It is a hard life, but for people like Mr. Darwon, and thousands of others who have flocked here from rural Liberia and neighboring countries, West Point

is a place where poor people can survive — and where the more ambitious can make a modest something from nothing.

“Our brothers can help us, and we can help them,” said Mary Goll, a former fighter for Charles G. Taylor, the warlord who is serving a 50-year sentence in a British jail for crimes against humanity.

Ms. Goll now runs a bar in West Point, where she has lived since the end of the country’s civil war in 2003. “To look for money here is easy.”

West Point rose from the ocean in the 1940s, when Monrovia’s first shipping port was dredged and created. A group of fishermen moved to the sandy patch of land next to the heart of Monrovia, and the capital’s largest slum was born. As the years passed and migration and war pushed more Liberians into Monrovia, West Point expanded.

Now it is packed with local fishermen and migrants from upcountry; gangsters who steal car batteries, rob people and deal drugs; and market women selling piles of coal, chicken feet and potato greens.

The slum is home to an array of ethnicities, religions and languages. Along West Point’s single paved road, lined with food, tea stalls, tailors and video shops, men in Islamic skullcaps and women in chadors live side-by-side with tattooed men in tank tops and women in micro shorts.

In recent years, residents have faced bigger battles than negative perceptions. The tide that is claiming vast swaths of their coast is becoming hungrier, and the community is vanishing, despite efforts to reclaim its man-made boundaries with garbage, and buffers made of sandbags and corrugated zinc.

The question now is whether to improve infrastructure and facilities in West Point — or to move the residents elsewhere.

Among the urban Americo-Liberian elites, who ruled the country for over a century, West Point has long had a reputation for crime and depravity.

The lyrics of a popular tune, “West Point Calypso,” that played in Monrovia’s high-end clubs during the 1960s reflected those sentiments. “Don’t go down there I beg you don’t, this is the place they call the West Point. Woman,

man, pekin and dog, everybody living at the mercy of God.” (A pekin is a small boy.)

But Samuel Kofi Woods, a former minister for public works who grew up in West Point, said that characterization was unfair.

“Once you say you are from West Point, you are a reject,” said Mr. Woods, who is now a human rights lawyer. He said that West Point reflected the class divisions that have defined Liberia since its founding by freed slaves in 1847, who dominated the native population for more than a century before a military coup in 1980.

“The elite imposes upon the minds of people that there is a group of people who are bad in this society, and that you should keep them in a situation of denial,” Mr. Woods said.

In August 2014, the neighborhood began its fight against the Ebola virus, after being cordoned off by the police and the military in an attempt to stop the spread of the disease.

The epidemic drew attention to the living conditions in West Point, where most people have limited access to water and use wooden toilets that hang on stilts over the river. Electricity is intermittent, in part because of power theft.

Since West Point registered its last Ebola case in December 2014, small improvements in infrastructure have occurred.

International organizations like Oxfam and Unicef, in partnership with the Liberian government, have built a handful of public toilets and taps with treated water that is sold at a cheap rate, though they run dry when the main reservoir does. The local school that was used as an Ebola holding center has been renovated, and West Point now has its first ambulance.

But many in West Point complain about the slow pace of improvement.

“During the dry season, we suffer a lot of water shortages, we can’t find land to build toilets,” said Thomas Tweh, whose nongovernmental group focuses on water and sanitation issues. “We don’t have a hospital, we have a clinic. It is an injustice to us.”

Mr. Tweh and others fear that the government is more focused on

relocating the residents of West Point than solving the community's problems.

Successive Liberian administrations have tried and failed to relocate West Point, in part because of poor planning and the grudging attachment of many residents who have lived there for decades.

A phased plan to relocate the whole community has been drafted by the government of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, but it has not been carried out. However, officials say that the coastal erosion could tip the balance.

"It has always been the desire of the government to relocate West Point," said Gyude Moore, the minister for public works. "The weather and the conditions are forcing the government closer and closer to that resolution."

Mayor Clara Doe Mvogo of Monrovia puts it more bluntly: The community will one day be wiped off the map.

"West Point is not going to just wake up and move one day; these people realize that the ocean is going to clean that land," she said. "You cannot continue to build infrastructure."

The National Housing Authority has secured land for construction in a suburb in western Monrovia. However, it is unclear how many housing units will be built or how much residents will have to pay.

And it seems unlikely that West Point, one of the largest voting blocs in Monrovia, will be moved before presidential and legislative elections at the end of 2017.

Whatever happens, Mr. Darwon just hopes he can make it out of West Point one day. He does not share his neighbors' complicated fondness for the community. For him, the neighborhood is a place of hardship and struggle from which one must escape. It is a place that must be overcome. It is a place where children do not have a future, where insecurity reigns and you must put up until you can get out.

"You come here only to make business and go to a different community to live," he said during a moment of respite by the reservoir on a recent afternoon.

Someone farther down the road called him for water. Mr. Darwon wiped the sweat off his brow, threw his body behind the trolley and pushed on.

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