

WorldNews

Crafting a new life in a Sierra Leone refugee camp



Letter from Freetown Helen Fallon

"If you learn a skill you can help yourself," Kumba says.

In a lively - almost humorous - way, she tells me about her journey on foot from her home in Kono, eastern Sierra Leone, to a refugee camp in neighbouring Guinea.

"Everywhere the rebels were

running after us. When we meet the rebels, we say we are followers of Foday Sankoh [leader of the Revolutionary United Front, the people known as the rebels].

"When we meet the soldiers [government army], we say we are followers of Johnny Paul [Johnny Paul Koroma, head of the Sierra Leonean army], when we meet the Kamojars [a civilian militia who were supposed to have magical powers], we say we are followers of Tejan Kabbah [leader of the Kamojars]."

Kumba spent four years in the refugee camp in Guinea. She was repatriated to Freetown, to a camp for displaced people at Grafton, about 10 miles outside the city.

"Now I am weaving. My children are with me. They are all in school. One is in secondary school. We cannot move back easily. When you are a woman

alone with children, when you go back home, you will have nobody to help you," she says matter of factly.

For Kumba and the other 13,700 residents at Grafton camp, their home villages in the west and south of Sierra Leone are now a memory.

"People are meant to have gone home now the war is over, but they've put down roots here," Sr Celia Doyle, a Holy Rosary nun from Gorey, Co Wexford, explains. "Many of the women lost their husbands in the war and their villages were destroyed. There's nothing to go back to. They have children at school here now."

Five or six women are working handmade wooden looms, weaving brightly-coloured thread into long strips of cloth. Some other women are crocheting and sewing. On a small wooden table, the women display their goods. The work area is sheltered from

the sun and the rains - which begin in May and end in September - by tarpaulin on long wooden poles.

The project was started in 2003 by Sr Celia, with a small grant from Trócaire and personal funding. About 30 women have taken part so far.

Now they are selling crochet bags, macramé coasters and table mats and clothes made from country cloth, a material not unlike linen but heavier and coarser. Sr Celia now comes to the camp two days a week. Kumba, who is leader or chair of the camp, keeps it running smoothly.

"I wanted the women to learn skills that the average person in Sierra Leone doesn't have, so that they can make things which shops and tourists might buy. There are many women already making tie-dyed cloth, so we went for something different. I knew macramé, so started to show some of the women

how to do that," Sr Celia says.

She has also engaged a tailor-cum-weaver to teach the women. Any money earned goes into buying *chop* (food) for the women and their families and more materials, such as thread for weaving.

On the perimeter of the sewing area, women are tending to babies and young children. A black cauldron sits on an unlit three-stone fire. Clothes dry rapidly in the intense heat of the sun.

Despite the obvious poverty in the camp, life is returning to a type of normality. People saw their homes destroyed, their relatives maimed, raped and killed during a 10-year civil war (1991-2001) during which the Revolutionary United Front seized the country's diamond fields.

Many of the fields are in Kono - Kumba's home district - where the fighting was the most intense.

Sr Celia had to get out of the country three times. "The first time was the worst. That was January 1995. I'd been here, with some short breaks, since 1968. You don't walk away without being pulled apart."

Before we leave, I ask Kumba what she hopes for the future.

"I am hoping that my children will go to school. I was made to leave school to get married. I married very young. I have bigger children. They are not with me now. They have to make their own life. I want to stay here with my children, to make a better house, to continue with the weaving and sewing."

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