

Kroo Bay

By Larry Carpenter

Kroo Bay was new to me. It existed in my past as one of those romantic sounding places that the Freetown city people made nonchalant reference to. But I was a man from the country, a Peace Corps Volunteer teaching in the far north, and was more comfortable in the bush than the city.

But 36 years after I left Sierra Leone I was walking through Kroo Bay. It was overwhelming. Nothing about it was romantic. Kroo Bay was an area of the capital city that was never meant to be occupied, a valley between the King Tom Peninsula and the Government Wharf. As it nears the sea the Kroo Bay section flattens out and spreads out to a broad flat plain. It was an area that carried rain water through Freetown from the mountains behind the city to the sea and during the rainy season that is a lot of water.



To say that Kroo Bay is now occupied doesn't express reality. Kroo Bay is squalor. I have traveled to many countries since leaving Sierra Leone but nothing I have seen compares to Kroo Bay.

Mostly, it was the war that drove people here, the decade of civil war that ravished the country during the 1990s. The war started in the east, an unwelcome export of the disaster in Liberia. The "rebels" of the Revolutionary United

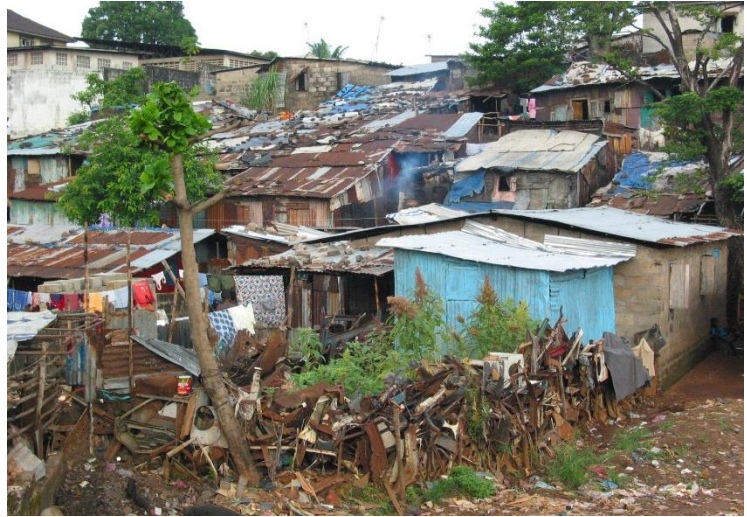
Front (RUF) obtained weapons through Liberia in exchange for diamonds. In their thirst for blood and violence they kidnapped children and forced them to kill and destroy farms and villages. Villagers that were lucky enough to survive fled north and eventually to refugee camps in Guinea or west into the relative safety of Freetown.

The population of Freetown swelled. New arrivals sought out relatives or fellow tribesmen. They needed a place to stop their flight. Freetown was already crowded but there had to be room. Any open space became home to someone. Families and extended kin took up tentative residence. Squatters were everywhere.

Kroo Bay had some open space. Shacks sprung up. Any available material was used to build squatter's shelter – tin roofing, shipping crates, billboards were ripped down. Anything that could be used to enclose a space was put to use.

The government was engaged in a war. The meager resources it could scrape together were expended in repelling the rebels. There were no resources to expend to provide even the basic necessities of daily life for the refugees. Nothing for water,

toilets, garbage removal or any other basic infrastructure.



Now, the war was over. It was ended when foreign troops from other West African countries intervened and then were replaced by a large peace keeping force from the United Nations. In the four years since the war ended, many Freetown refugees returned to their homelands to rebuild their villages.

But many did not return. Many chose to stay in Freetown. Many chose to stay in Kroo Bay. This is the Kroo Bay I was walking through, the Kroo Bay that is still home to thousands of people; the Kroo Bay that was never meant for human habitation. This is the Kroo Bay that overwhelmed my senses as I walked.

I was not a casual visitor. It is hard to imagine anyone – especially a foreigner – casually walking through here. I was being guided. I was tagging along on an official visit and our guide was the city council man elected from Kroo Bay. I was along to take pictures for a government official and a civil engineer that were looking for ways to make sanitation improvements in the area.



I was overwhelmed by the filth. I was overwhelmed by the refuse of the city lying everywhere. But I could shift my eyes from the squalor to the kids that were laughing and playing and trying to get in front of my camera. I could choose to listen to the children laughing and scuffling. But I couldn't ignore the smell. The smell was everywhere. It was the smell of the open drains, the



ditches and the filthy water that was moving slowly toward the sea a few hundred meters away.

This was the start of the dry season and it had not rained in several days. The water in the drains and ditches was grey, a dirty dishwater grey. It was carrying the household waste of every dwelling upstream and up the

side of the distant mountains. It all passed through Kroo Bay. Some dwelling walls formed the channels for the drains.

I stood on a bridge crossing some of the worst of the wet filth flowing to the sea. I looked upstream and watched kids play in it – laughing and scuffling, up to their knees in filth. I watched women wash the family clothes in it. I watched men digging for god knows what in it. When I looked down stream I saw a few dozen people walking on the flats just before it entered the sea. They were poking through the filth looking for anything useful that had escaped recovery farther up. There were pigs wallowing in the filth, rooting in the muck for anything edible. Ducks floated on the liquid using their beaks to dig into the muck for food. And everywhere there was the smell of rotting, the smell of waste, the smell of degradation.

Since the war ended and some of the refugees returned to the countryside, some improvements have been installed. I saw an occasional water stand pipe with long lines of children waiting turns to collect a bucket of water for the family. I was shown communal toilet facilities



with showers and stations for washing clothes. I was afraid to ask where the toilet waste went.



We visited a day care center and went inside a classroom with probably 40 young children in uniform sitting two to a table built for one smiling and begging to have their photo taken, “Snap me. Snap me!” The teachers were sitting quietly in front, not much was happening in the room.

A tomblike concrete mass surrounded a well displaying the label “WELL FOR DOMESTIC PURPOSES”. This was surrounded

by the wet and the litter and rubbish that covered the entire landscape. A rusting automobile frame rested nearby. A young boy dipped his bucket into the well. Moments before, the bucket had been resting on the ground among the filth and trash. What would the next bucket pull from the well?

We walked past back yards where all the cooking takes place. Food is cooked over open fires usually using firewood from the surrounding hills that are rapidly being denuded. Pots of rice and various stews



simmered balanced upon three stones while ducks and pigs nosed around. These were the same ducks and pigs that spend much of their time in the ditches and drains I had seen earlier.

We walked into a large open field of hard packed gravel with occasional rocks scattered about. This was a soccer field. The council man was seeking funds to build stands for spectators to watch games.

Then we went to the boys club where dozens of young men were gathered. Some were Freetown native but many had come from up country and were not going back. They have tasted city life. They have no jobs.

Many have little or no schooling. Some were sitting around smoking non-tobacco cigarettes. The government official wants to put them to work and the council man wants both employment and sanitation improvements.



One purpose of this walk through Kroo Bay was to identify projects that can improve conditions. These projects must be labor intensive. The idle youth represent plenty of potential labor. The civil engineer was looking at constructing walls along the ditches and drains to channel the water and keep it from overflowing into inhabited areas. Higher walls along the ditches would serve to keep people from playing or washing in the filthy water. They were looking to install large steel mesh filters at various places upstream to prevent trash from being washed down stream. They were talking of hiring some of the unemployed youths to regularly remove collected trash from the filters and cart it off to designated land fills.



As I completed my walk through Kroo Bay and retreated to the comfort of a US built SUV I looked up to the denuded mountains which used to be covered with dense forest. With no ground cover to contain

some of the water during the rainy season, will higher walls on the drains be able to contain the increased flow of water?

As I looked back toward the sea and the boys club, I saw scores and perhaps hundreds of young men, idle, unemployed young men with little to do to release their energy. Today they were friendly and interested in why I was there. We laughed and joked. But what is in store for them and for the country when the restless youth becomes bored? What will happen if tribal divisions intrude and gangs form? What will happen if this unrest once again ignites as renewed civil war after the UN withdraws? Could such a war engulf the city this time around?