



Janice has just spotted the first signs of winter visitors in the sky. Were they swifts or were they swallows, mingling with resident vultures soaring high above the city? The sight of the smaller species begs the question, are the martins, swallows and swifts constant visitors, be it the northern or southern hemisphere? Do they not have homes?



The question of homes is on the computer screen in front of Peter, as the UK government has just announced a radical package of measures allowing local authorities to offer council houses on short-term lease rather than for life. It is a measure intended to shuffle the homeless to areas outside local government limits in a bid to stop 'their houses' becoming a 'poverty trap'. Not surprisingly, housing charities have condemned the proposal for appearing to mount 'a deliberate attack' on the poorest in society. British society that it is!

Meanwhile, the BBC world service radio announces that the UN Habitat - The State of African



Cities report, indicates that the size of many African cities is likely to triple in the next 30 year with 60% of all Africans living in cities. “No African government can afford to ignore the ongoing rapid urban transition taking place across the continent. Cities must become priority areas for public policies, with hugely increased investments to build adequate governance capacities, equitable services delivery, affordable housing provision and better wealth distribution,” said Joan Clos, the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT.

Known as “The push and the pull factor” in rapid urbanisation in Africa, the effect is clearly seen



across Freetown. Salone’s civil war exercised a push that created a huge demographic growth in the capital and with it a massive urban proliferation, a steep economic inequality and widespread human misery which persists today. The pull effect is that individual economic progress is perceived to be available in the big city where options and opportunities are assumed to be greater than in rural areas. Economic growth is most evident in the mining sector, beyond the capital, but the development that



includes urban industrialisation with job creation and higher productivity is not evident. If it were, such progress would provide the basis of the pursuit of good governance, proper housing and basic services for all. Meanwhile, the number of informal settlements continues to increase both along the shoreline of Aberdeen Creek, Kroo Bay and up the hillsides of Dwarzak and New England. However, it is in the East of the city where in 1999, the invasion of rebels caused the destruction of about 6,000 homes in the areas of Kissy, Wellington, Calaba Town, and Allen Town.

One of our colleagues, after completing his days teaching, has never been swift to make his way



home eastwards from the college in the centre of the city. To get home, he faces a tough task. There are choices, be it on over saturated public transport (mini-buses) where the competition for even space and not a seat is keen and at times aggressive, or a life threatening journey on the back of a motorbike, or alternatively on foot, with the tens of thousands who choose to walk along the major highway, the Kissy Road, all forms making such journey demanding and problematic. Of late, his procrastination and delaying





tactics have been even more exaggerated, as he and his family are living under the threat of eviction from a home that is without running water or electricity and for which he pays the owner £25 per month, 25% of his basic teaching salary. The imminent removal comes as a result of his protesting at the 100% increase in rent. Explaining the options available, he cites the working of the city housing rent tribunal to which he can appeal and be heard by under-paid public servants who at best would delay the demand for increased rent and at worse be tempted to take the offer of financial support (from the landlord) for urgently needed domestic expenses of their own and rule against the tenant.



A driver, of the Methodist Church connexional office, and his family have just become our new neighbours, living in temporary accommodation. All six members of his family, along with several other families, were forcibly removed from a compound in the heart of the city by bailiffs, supported by police officers. The event attracted national press coverage for a brutal attack on property and provocation of violence but despite the evident injustice no re-instatements have since followed.

An east African catholic theologian Richard Rwiza writes that whilst the urban poor are “the least economically advantaged, the least socially involved and the hardest hit by the housing problem, they are paradoxically the least institutionally assisted people of the urban area”. And as our colleagues, (neither of them being abjectly poor) would testify, it is the poor who can least

expect the support of judicial institutions like the courts, the police station, or indeed the health



and education sectors.

It would be hard to imagine the Minister for Land, Country Planning and the Environment, in Sierra Leone, Dr Dennis Sindy, quoting the words of David Orr, the chief executive of the National Housing Federation in the UK, who said: "People need the stability and security of a safe home."

However, there has been some recognition made of the dire problems of housing related issues. Some 750,000 residents of slum communities across the Freetown municipality will soon benefit from improved water, sanitation and hygiene conditions through the intervention of the Urban WASH Consortium programme initiated by five international non-governmental organisations operating in the country. Speaking at the official launch of the programme, board chairman



Emmanuel Gaima - who doubles as country director of Oxfam - said the consortium was formed to complement government's effort in attaining the millennium development goals (MDGs). "We cannot solve all the problems that have to do with sanitation in this country. 750,000 beneficiaries will be targeted for the next 3 to 5 years of the programme. We will holistically focus on water, sanitation and prolific health program," he said.

According to the Oxfam country director, the initiative intends to reduce the rate of water, sanitation and hygiene diseases by supporting and working with the government, adding that the goal of the programme was to improve the health status of selected vulnerable communities in the urban area of the city.

Head of country office DFID, Dominic O'Neill, described the initiative as very important as the burden of disease, due to poor water and sanitation, was very huge. He said the long term strategy to ensure the success of the programme should be through national funding, adding that Sierra Leone has the lowest revenue base in sub-Saharan Africa.

However, the housing needs of our colleagues and their families continue, but they do not have the same kind of choices as the swift, swallows and martins. Their home is Salone.

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