

In Besieged Monrovia, Crowded Room Is Humble Refuge

Former Manager Struggles to Feed Extended Family

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MONROVIA, Liberia -- Sekou Bility waited in a house built on the ruined promise of Liberia. It stood well up Snapper Hill, in the shadow of the towering, formerly majestic Masonic Temple that lately reeked from the exposed filth of a thousand people cowering within its moldering walls, listening for the sound of shooting.

Among them, until recently, was the sister of Bility's fiancée, who during her stay in the temple's dank caverns contracted cholera. So did her 8-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter. Now they were living with Bility. Nine people were crowded into a single room in a city of crowded rooms, another fact of life during wartime.

"They had nothing," Bility said of the extra people he supports, with no job and fading prospects in a city suspended between war and the delayed arrival of peacekeepers who might keep it at bay. "They didn't even come with toothpaste."

In a steaming capital swollen with families uprooted by fighting that resumed with a vengeance over the weekend, Bility's crowded room on Snapper Hill offered a glimpse at what passes for refuge in Liberia after 14 years of war. A day last week with this lean and likable 33-year-old, once the well-off sales manager for an oil company, was a window to the daily struggle of people living inside the collapse of Africa's oldest republic.

"The war has broken me down to where I am living the life of a typical Liberian," he said.

His home is one room in a big stone-block house above the clutter of tin shacks and squatters' quarters on Snapper Hill's stony slopes. Built by a granddaughter of the first Liberian president born in Africa -- Hilary Johnson -- it is now rented out by the room: the equivalent of \$5 a month for the airless cubicles along the foundation, \$20 for the bedroom where the Bility clan sleeps.

That morning, typical of a day between rebel offensives -- when everything grows worse -- he did not have breakfast.

The scampering children got leftover rice, plus a powdered cream mix for his 14-month-old son, Lasana. Bility, who liked eggs and sausage in "normal times," told himself he doesn't care.

"I just move on," he said, striding downtown in a shirt pressed with an iron filled with hot coals. "Sometimes I pretend I've eaten, just so my children have something."

Bility's life started where the war did, in Nimba County, a notch of Liberia adjoining Ivory Coast and Guinea. The son of a petty trader and one of his two wives, Bility had eight siblings and no particular problems in the first 11 years of life.

Liberia then was still governed by a local elite descended from the freed American slaves who settled the country in the early 1800s. They established domination over the area's indigenous population based on the premise, one historian said, "that you were the people who sold us into slavery, and we will rule you."

And so they did until indigenous Africans in Liberia's army killed the president in 1980 and replaced a peculiar system of black colonialism with the more modern African tradition of delivering political power from the barrel of a gun, one that in 1990 brought Charles Taylor into Nimba County with a rebel army.

"We didn't take it for serious" at first, Bility said. But then an uncle and 11 children were slaughtered, apparently because of their tribe, and Bility understood the ethnic dimension of the new rebellion. Terrified, he persuaded a German aid worker to smuggle him south to Monrovia in the back seat of his truck.

When it was still possible to do well in the capital, Bility did well. At the oil company, Sahara Trading, he had a \$450 monthly salary, a fat housing allowance and a company car driven by a former militia fighter. In his spare time Bility earned a degree in economics and met, in a tailor shop, Kumba. He still calls her his fiancée. They have a daughter, Hawa, 6, and Lasana.

The war went on, but at a distance. It entered Monrovia only twice before Taylor was elected president in 1997, threatening to resume his guerrilla campaign if he lost. The new president then gave a monopoly on petroleum imports to Sahara's competitor.

Bility's employer went under. The driver, who returned to the militia, became a general. Bility moved his family to the room on Snapper Hill in 2001.

With no job, he scrounges for money trying to broker business deals while Kumba sells little bags of charcoal to the neighbors.

"I heard about a guy who has some gas pumps," Bility said. It was 11 a.m. Tuesday, and raining buckets. Bility stood in a storefront sipping Chinese green tea and pondering his next move. But the man opening the service station was not in his office, so Bility did not know if he had a buyer for gas pumps.

Dodging raindrops, he dipped around the corner to see a man who thought he could find charcoal for sale.

Charcoal is the family business now. Bility invested in five bags with the money he had left over after buying food with \$100 a brother sent from Minnesota. Kumba breaks it into smaller chunks and sells it in blue and white striped plastic bags: about 7 cents for small, about 13 cents for big.

Those prices are double what they were before the war began in 1989, but with the extra mouths to feed, it's still not enough. "We are eating more than our profit," he said.

But the charcoal man was not to be found either. Almost no serious businessman was. Most Monrovia stores remained padlocked last week against fears that were realized on Saturday, when rebels attacked the city again. When they came twice in June, the fighting was so intense that government militiamen called it World War I and World War II. Liberians said the latest attack could have been prevented if President Bush had dispatched U.S. troops.

"Liberians feel anything that's American is perfect," Bility said.

Meanwhile, shopping was limited to sidewalks. Some shopkeepers sold their inventories to street vendors rather than risk seeing it looted. One street, Johnson, featured mostly used household goods stolen from homes in the continuing lawless atmosphere: foam rubber mats, used toilet seats.

Bility headed home. At a sign advertising "Clean and Pure Drinking Water for Sale," he turned left and balanced himself atop a section of the old water main, which last carried potable water about 10 years ago, when Taylor's forces put the city under siege. Electrical service stopped at about the same time, rendering the city of more than a million people a giant village, residents often say.

At the big house on Snapper Hill, Bility found his landlord, Dasia Massaquoi, sitting at the only table in the house, watching the children play on a bit of folded cardboard tucked in the corner.

"We're just like mercury," said Massaquoi, who sleeps in the master bedroom off the ruined living room. "We twist and bend. That's the good side of Liberia."

The Club beer he sipped was fetched by a young boy to whom he handed the equivalent of 25 cents. It was bottled at Monrovia Brewing Co., held briefly by the rebels, who emptied the stock.

"But it's passivity," Massaquoi continued. "If we're passive, we get another gang of hoodlums to run the country."

Bility listened politely. The only meal he would eat that day was cooking down the hall, a dark corridor lined with translucent five-gallon jugs of water bought from the European Union tanks up the hill. During the fighting, trucks could not make it to the water tanks.

The kitchen is African: floor bare and windows open to let out the smoke of the four portable charcoal grills. Kumba, 23, squatted over hers, stirring the mixture of greens and spices that would serve as dinner, with a few small fish. The banter was steady with the other women in the small room.

Elizabeth, a cousin who came with her brother, Saah, sorted rice from flecks of dirt in another pot. Massaquoi's wife, Mae, rattled an iron pot of the hard shellfish that Liberians call "kiss me" because you have to suck out the meat. A grinning neighbor climbed the stairs, announcing herself as a BBC correspondent because she had news.

Reminded, Bility reached for his radio. Since he lost his job, it has become his primary pastime; radio is the news medium of choice across Africa, where newspapers are a luxury and few can afford a television set. Bility tuned for local news to Radio Veritas, a service of the resolutely independent Catholic archdiocese.

"If I want the government's side of the story, I go to Kiss FM. Kiss FM is owned by the president."

He listened for anything confirming that the rebels were planning a fresh attack, a rumor that would prove accurate. Mortars rained around Snapper Hill on Saturday, just as they did in the last rebel offensive, when a shell landing across the street killed 21 people. After the meal -- which in the African custom the women and children spoon out of plastic bowls in the kitchen, the men at the table -- he listened again, but the local stations had gone off the air. Many had lost equipment to looters.

As dusk fell, Bility considered the extravagance of a phone call. He has no phone, and land lines have been out since the fighting. But at a storefront calling center he can pay about 50 cents a minute to call on a cell phone. It would certainly be worth it if the man considering a gas station wanted gas pumps. But he didn't, not with a new offensive looming, and Bility was off the phone in less than 60 seconds.

Back home, he gave Lasana a bath in a plastic tub and put the boy to bed. His guests took turns in the bathroom, a dingy American-style bath with a toilet that must be flushed with a bucket but which -- miraculously, in a village of 1 million -- empties into the main sewer line fortuitously located directly under the house.

"After 150 years of independence, we shouldn't be living this kind of life, you know," Bility said, sitting on the living room floor. "By African standards, Liberians should be middle-class people. And we're not. We're very far from it."