

"Slum tourism" stirs controversy in Kenya

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By Andrew Cawthorne

NAIROBI (Reuters) - It's the de rigueur stop off for caring foreign dignitaries. It reached a worldwide audience as a backdrop to the British blockbuster "The Constant Gardener".

Any journalist wanting a quick Africa poverty story can find it there in half an hour. And now at least one travel agency offers tours round Kenya's Kibera slum, one of Africa's largest.

"People are getting tired of the Maasai Mara and wildlife. No one is enlightening us about other issues. So I've come up with a new thing -- slum tours," enthused James Asudi, general manager of Kenyan-based Victoria Safaris.

But not everyone in Kenya is waxing so lyrical about the trail of one-day visitors treading the rubbish-strewn paths, sampling the sewage smell, and photographing the tin-roof shacks that house 800,000 of the nation's poorest in a Nairobi valley.

Indeed, the recent well-meaning visit of U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon -- coming hard on the heels of other foreign celebrities including even U.S. comedian Chris Rock -- drew a stern editorial from Kenya's leading newspaper.

"What is this fascination with Kibera among people who do not know what real poverty means?" asked the Daily Nation.

"More to the point, how do Kenyans themselves feel about this back-handed compliment as the custodians of backwardness, filth, misery and absolute deprivation?"

Answer: Not a lot, at least according to an informal, random survey by this correspondent in Kibera itself.

While all recognize the potential for good from such attention, plus the pressure it puts on the government and others to help slum-dwellers, most said tangible benefits so far were few, while the embarrassment factor was growing every day.

"They see us like puppets, they want to come and take pictures, have a little walk, tell their friends they've been to the worst slum in Africa," said car-wash worker David Kabala.

"But nothing changes for us. If someone comes, let him do something for us. Or if they really want to know how we think and feel, come and spend a night, or walk round when it's pouring with rain here and the paths are like rivers."

"PITY TOURS"

Even groups working day-in, day-out in Kibera -- and dependent on foreign funding -- are getting weary.

Salim Mohamed, project director for the Carolina for Kibera charity, said the stream of high-profile visits to the 3 km-long (1.8 mile) corridor was raising expectations among residents which, when not quickly fulfilled, fueled frustration with the appalling living conditions.

Visits by tourists, which reached a crescendo during the recent anti-capitalist World Social Forum in Nairobi, were testing the local hospitality culture to the limit, he added.

"It's getting out of control. And if it's not done in a way the community appreciates, it's insulting to them," said Mohamed, who was born in another major Nairobi slum, Mathare.

"I think this concept started in Soweto (in South Africa). ... Kibera does not need pity tours, it needs action."

Echoing a constant complaint by Africans of Western media, office administrator Christine Ochieng, 20, said the image of unmitigated misery in Kibera was not fair to her community.

"I can see how visiting the largest slum in Africa is very attractive to people, but there are so many untold stories here," she said, rattling off ideas she and friends would like to include in a local magazine they want to start.

Firstly, there is Kibera's hidden middle-class -- the people who have enough money to move out, but choose to stay because they can't bear the relative solitude of posher neighbors.

Then there's the plethora of self-help, art, dance, drama, and sports projects going on in Kibera. "But people just want to talk about poverty, poverty, poverty all the time," she said.

Victoria Safaris' manager Asudi, from the same Luo tribe which constitutes the majority of Kibera residents, insists the tour he offers of Kibera and other slums in Nairobi and Kisumu in west Kenya, are beneficial to locals.

"RAVE SPOT"

They raise awareness, and he hands his tourists back a percentage of their payment to donate to a cause they have seen on their walkabout, he says, such as a health or school project.

His publicity, however, has ruffled feathers. "After lunch, proceed to the Korokocho slum where you will be amazed with the number of roaming children," reads a typical paragraph.

Nairobi's chattering-classes are not amused.

"Kibera is the rave spot in Kenya," wrote one columnist sarcastically. "For where else can one see it all in one simple stop? The AIDS victims dying slowly on a cold, cardboard bed. The breastless teenager. ... Plastic-eating goats fighting small children ... and -- ah yes -- the famous 'shit-rolls-downhill-flying-toilets'. It is unbeatable."

Government spokesman Alfred Mutua has led a campaign to promote the bright side of Kenya and clean up its cities. He shakes his head when asked about the Kibera phenomenon.

"It is very sad that when dignitaries come here, the first place they run to is Kibera, the residents are getting tired of people coming and giving lip-service," he told Reuters.

"Kibera is the 'in' place everybody wants be associated with, whether they are doing anything about it or not. ... People look at others who are poor and destitute and get a 'feel good' attitude about themselves, that they are above that."

(Additional reporting by Wangui Kanina)

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