

# Tide turns against Liberia's biggest slum

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Liberia's West Point is being swallowed by the sea, tearing the heart out of the neighbourhood and leaving thousands displaced

The fishermen, hustlers and market traders of West Point have survived two civil wars and an Ebola epidemic, but this resilient Liberian slum cannot hold back the ocean that is slowly swallowing it.

The country's biggest township is being swallowed by the sea, tearing the heart out of one of the capital's liveliest neighbourhoods and leaving the government struggling to rehouse thousands of displaced residents.

"Sometimes at 2am when you're sleeping the waves will go straight on top of the house. Before you come to, everybody is confused; you're soaked with water," said Cecelia Nimley, 56, a lifelong resident of West Point.

"The swell will just wipe away things. I sent my grandchildren to some friends and the big ones are on their own," she said, describing losing her house and all her possessions to the waves.

The shacks are stacked together any which way, built from a variety of reclaimed materials.

Sitting on a peninsula, jutting into the Atlantic Ocean, the slum is being hit by rising seas—a consequence of global warming—and [coastal erosion](#), say local officials.

West Point's residents have long battled poverty and drug addiction is rife in the area. The community was torn apart when the Ebola virus struck. But the encroaching sea water is adding to the struggle to meet basic needs.



Sitting on a peninsula, jutting into the Atlantic Ocean, the West Point slum is being hit by rising seas

"When it comes, the water in the wells gets salty, and we can no longer use it for drinking or cooking," said Amie Myers, 33, a mother of six children.

Some 90,000 people live in West Point, which covers just four square kilometres (1.5 square miles)—a fraction bigger than New York's Central Park—and this area is shrinking by the day.

Some of the displaced have been living in markets, on the roadside or in the living rooms of friends for upwards of a year.

## **End of seaside community**

Fishing has traditionally been the main commercial activity in West Point, but many are now having to abandon their life on the sea.

Fisherman Amos Doe, 45, stood by what remains of his house, now smashed into two by the Atlantic.



The West Point slum is being hit by rising seas—a consequence of global warming—and coastal erosion

"It makes me feel sad because you know as a family man, living beside the water, there is no guaranteed place that will make you say 'I got hope for my lifetime'," Doe said glumly.

The authorities said at least 4,000 people were made homeless in April alone, and are allocating temporary shelters to families further inland.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf visited the stricken community in May, which was hit less than two years ago by Ebola spreading like wildfire in a place where everyone lives cheek-by-jowl.

At the height of the epidemic the whole slum was quarantined, leading club-wielding youths to storm a medical facility treating Ebola patients. This was followed by a riot against security forces.

Bendu Quaye lost the father of her five children to Ebola, and the 27-year-old is one of the few who has been rehoused after staying with a married friend for months.

"I was sleeping on the floor, beside the bed, with my kids," Quaye told AFP.



Authorities say at least 4,000 people were made homeless in April alone

## **Time running out**

Sampson Nyan, Commissioner of West Point Township said the slum was being hit by a double whammy.

"Both [climate change](#) and (coastal) erosion are combined here. This is happening in several parts of the country but West Point is the worst of all," he said.

"Erosion of the peninsula... has been going on for more than a decade now. The sea has been creeping in. It became more intensive with the climate change."

The slum started to disappear in November 2014, with more than 450 homes submerged as Ebola raged unchecked.

By April this year, "people were sleeping in the open, people were sleeping in the market places and school buildings," Nyan said.



Authorities are allocating temporary shelters to families further inland

There are now at least 3,000 inhabitants "in a very serious condition" and needing immediate help, Nyan said.

Prefab structures have been put up on a parcel of land away from the slum at a cost initially estimated at \$1.5 million.

More permanent structures have not yet been built because of problems completing land purchases.

Yet time is running out.

"We have been talking to the president for the relocation of the entire township," Demore Moore, chairman of West Point's Disaster Victim Association, told AFP.

"The only solution is the relocation, otherwise the entire township will be swept away by the sea," he added.

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