

Ebola-hit Liberia sets out on road to recovery

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Clinging to cheap kitchenware and the hope of a better life, Fatima Kamara hawks her goods to travellers when she should probably be doing her homework.

The 16-year-old keeps her family afloat by selling at the main crossing point between her native Liberia and Sierra Leone, but she was put out of business for months when the Ebola crisis shut the border.

Today she is able to return to her spot on the reopened Mano River Bridge linking the countries, desperate to make up for lost income.

"Come and buy your rubber dishes for small money. Come and see the best offers. Small, small money. Anyone can afford it," Kamara cries out to potential customers making the crossing on foot.

Traders were dismayed when the bridge shut for six months at the height of an epidemic which has claimed more than 10,000 lives.

With the border reopened since February, the commercial post of Bo Waterside on the Liberian side is once again open for business, a symbol of hope for the country's desperately-needed economic recovery.

"I sell these dishes to help my parents in sending me to school. My parents are not working... I go to school in the morning and sell in the afternoon," Kamara tells AFP.

"When the border was closed I was afraid that I would not be able to go

to school."

Shops in Bo Waterside, a settlement of a few hundred that grew up around the crossing point, sell pasta, rice and local specialties such as popcorn balls.

Going hungry

It is difficult to quantify the damage done by the Ebola crisis, as very little data is available on the volume of cross-border trade, most of which is informal.

Locals at the border say countless thousands of Liberian entrepreneurs, unable to sell their goods, lost their sole means of income.

Before the epidemic, Liberia had notched up strong growth of more than nine percent per year since 2005, rising as high as 15.7 percent in 2007, according to World Bank figures.

But authorities fear the crisis will derail the impoverished state's drive to recover from 14 years of civil war, which by the time it ended in 2003 had claimed 250,000 lives.

The economy is forecast to grow by just three percent this year—less than half the pre-Ebola projection—equating to a loss in expected income of around \$200 million.

The World Bank conducted a series of mobile phone surveys between October and January to assess the damage done by Ebola to Liberian households.

It reported that 41 percent of breadwinners who had been working at the start of the crisis were unemployed, while three-quarters of households

admitted to worries over going hungry.

Liberia, one of the world's poorest countries, relies on imports from its neighbours for around 90 percent of its goods.

It was able to reopen its borders with key trading partners Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast in February after seeing a marked recovery from the Ebola crisis.

While Guinea and Ivory Coast decided against reciprocating the gesture, Sierra Leone followed suit and trade began to flow between the neighbours once more.

'Big Mamas'

Markets that had looked bereft in provincial towns like Bo Waterside, but also in the capital Monrovia, were re-energised as stalls began offering meat and fresh vegetables.

The vast majority of Liberia's cross border traders—some put the figure at 80 percent—are women and girls, who are the main breadwinners in their households.

Beatrice Gai, 53, is among these hardy entrepreneurs known locally as "Big Mamas", and for more than 30 years has been travelling to Guinea via Sierra Leone to pick up clothing.

"I have built a house out of it, I have schooled my kids who are out of university, and I am still doing it," she said.

"I am more than happy to see the border reopened. During the Ebola crisis I had to go into my savings to feed my family."

The opening of the borders has also been welcomed by shoppers, who saw prices soar as commodities became increasingly hard to find during the crisis.

The price of rice—a staple in Liberia, which consumes six million tonnes annually—was 35 percent higher in January than it had been 12 months earlier, according to the World Bank.

Diana Kpargoi of Sinje, 60 kilometres (37 miles) from the border, said a packet of candles had come down from 200 Liberian dollars (\$2.46, 2.20 euros) to just over a third of that cost.

"The borders were closed to protect us from the Ebola virus but I think the government should have created a corridor for the business people," she said.

"We could no longer afford a good meal, now it is OK."

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