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Kenya fighting poverty one deed at a time

KAREN CALABRIA

NAIROBI - Jane Mwangi beckons from her tin-roofed kiosk as passers-by, including former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright, trek gingerly through the garbage-strewn, muddy footpaths in Kibera, sub-Saharan Africa's largest slum.

"Something small?" she asks, moving about but taking care not to slip into the stagnant, reeking puddle at the foot of her storefront as she gestures at an assortment of sundries ranging from pencils to light bulbs to condoms.

Since 2001, Mwangi has traded in the sprawling slum's Toi Market, where she and 3 000 others set up shop each morning despite having no claim to the property on which they depend for their livelihoods.

"I live in constant fear of eviction," the 35-year-old mother-of-three told AFP, shooing away an errant pig feasting on sewage in the alleyway next to her stall.

This concern was among the many addressed to Albright as she toured the shantytown Tuesday on a fact-finding mission for the Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor, which is looking at the link between poverty and property.

"The biggest problem in the world today is the number of poor people who have no legal rights and are the victims of our civilisations," Albright told an assembly of slum dwellers after a tour of the slum's marketplace.

Pointing out the plastic sheeting and twine-bound bamboo pole holding up a rusty roof that offers little protection during the rainy season, Mwangi expands upon the numerous hardships with which she is routinely faced.

"If I owned this land, I would build a store out of cement so that when it rains the water would not leak through my roof and ruin my wares," she said.

"I would probably make more money and not be forced to live and work like this," Mwangi said.

More than 800 000 impoverished, and mostly unemployed, Kenyans have settled in Kibera, notorious for poor sanitation, violent crime, prostitution and disease and not a single resident

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has legal claim to the property they inhabit.

"People do not want to see informal settlements.

But this is where we can afford to live and shop," explained Kibera resident Ezekial Rema.

"How else are we going to survive in order to work for all the rich people?" The commission, which Albright co-chairs with Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto to provide policy recommendations to governments by 2008, seeks to improve the lives of the world's more than three billion poor, most of whom live without property rights or access to legal protection.

"There is a hidden potential if poor people become a part of the legal system, are given title to their lands and are able to participate in their economies," Albright said.

"People living in poor conditions don't want to be victims," she added.

In an attempt to empower themselves, the Toi Market traders banded together in 2002 to form a communal savings program that issues small loans to shopkeepers facing financial woes or looking to expand their enterprises.

"We are hardworking and we want the market to be secure so we can grow our businesses (and) improve our lives," said Joseph Muturi, who heads the scheme that now boasts a modest but healthy US\$215 000 portfolio.

But, he stressed, owning land is the ultimate goal as it would provide slum residents and merchants "a lot more security".

"We would be able to build permanent structures, pave the footpaths and install lights for security," he told AFP.

"We'd then be entitled to government services like sanitation and the installation of a sewage system."

Nelson Warui Waithaka, 41, a used clothes trader, said he was eager for the Kenyan government to enact land reform that would benefit him and millions of other informal settlers around the country.

"I live in constant fear of raids, eviction and confiscation of my products and all my money," the father-of-four said.

"I just hope for a day when I don't have to be concerned with that any longer."

Nampa-AFP

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PO Box 20783 - Windhoek - 42 John Meinert Street
Tel: +264 (61) 279600 - Fax: +264 (61) 279602



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