

International

Ghana cashes in on slave heritage tourism; could benefit economy

A 400-year slavery anniversary sparks rise in heritage tours

ASSIN MANSO: In a clearing at the turnoff to Assin Manso, a billboard depicts two African slaves in loin-cloths, their arms and legs in chains. Beside them are the words, "Never Again!" This is "slave river," where captured Ghanaians submitted to a final bath before being shipped across the Atlantic into slavery centuries ago, never to return to the land of their birth. Today, it is a place of somber homecoming for the descendants of those who spent their lives as someone else's property.

The popularity of the site has swelled this year, 400 years after the trade in Africans to the English colonies of America began. This month's anniversary of the first Africans to arrive in Virginia has caused a rush of interest in ancestral tourism, with people from the United States, the Caribbean and Europe seeking out their roots in West Africa. "Ten years ago, no one went to the slave river, but this year has been massive," said Awuracy Butler, who runs a company called Butler Tours.

She said business has nearly doubled this year, which has been touted as the Year of Return for the African diaspora tracing their family history. The number of tourists has forced her to hire more vehicles, she said. "Everyone wants to add the slave river to their tour," she said. The coastal forts where they spent their last days in Ghana in suffocating conditions are also increasingly popular, she said. The increase in tourism has been an economic boon for Ghana, which unlike other West African countries has aggressively marketed its "heritage" offerings for the anniversary.

Officials see it as an opportunity to entice some much-needed foreign investment into the economy, dogged in recent years by high inflation and public debt that has needed an International Monetary Fund lending program to fix. The Ghana Tourism Authority expects 500,000 visitors this year, up from 350,000 in 2018. Of those,

45,000 are estimated to be seeking their ancestral roots, a 42% increase from last year.

On a recent day in the capital, Accra, a delegation of tribal elders and a representative of the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre welcomed a tour group at a hotel in the city. At an event in a low-ceilinged hotel conference room, the tour guide encouraged the visitors to sing a hymn in a local language, gently chiding them for not yet knowing the tune. "You are Ghanaians now," he said.

Members of the group, who were mostly African American, went up to the front one by one to pose with a smiling tourism ministry official or one of the robe-clad elders as they received an official certificate of participation. The investment representative launched into a lengthy power-point presentation focused on the need for investment in Ghana's cocoa sector and the minimum capital requirements for joint ventures. With an average spend of \$1,850 per tourist, the tourism authority expects this year's revenues to top \$925 million, a 50% increase from 2018, which it hopes to sustain over the

next three years at least. The amount is dwarfed by Ghana's \$2-billion cocoa industry but is considered essential in a country of 28 million people who mostly live in poverty.

Anthony Bouadi, a tour guide at Cape Coast Castle, a fortress where the captives were kept until they were sent on ships over the Atlantic, said he believes the site will change the lives of those who visit. "The moment you get to know your history, it is going to change you," he said. "We are encouraging our brothers and sisters from the US, from the Caribbean from Europe to come back to their Motherland Africa to get to know the culture ... and whatever the ancestors went through."

The surge of visitors is part of a global phenomenon:



ACCRA: In this file photo taken on July 31, 2019, US Representative Ilhan Omar poses for pictures as she arrives at the Ghana's Parliament in Accra, during a three-day visit to the country to mark the 400 years anniversary since the first slave shipment left the Ghana's coast for United States. —AFP

Airbnb data shows a five-fold increase in people traveling to places connected to their ancestry worldwide since 2014. US genetics company African Ancestry says its sales of DNA tests tripled after last year's release of the superhero film "Black Panther," an Afro-centric blockbuster with a predominantly black cast. The company is launching an ancestry-based travel service later this year.

To make the most of the moment, Ghana will host a mass "ancestry reveal" on Friday. More than 80 African

American participants, including the head of the NAACP, will learn their genetic history, touted as the largest ceremony of its kind in Africa's history. Ghana has long encouraged its diaspora to return and has strong links with the African American community. Malcolm X visited in the 1960s and spent time with the American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou, who lived there at the time. The prominent black writer and activist W.E.B. Du Bois settled and died in Ghana. Since, many other ordinary African American families have returned. —Reuters

Independence in the air in South Yemen

ADEN: Colorful flags emblazoned with a red star are being held aloft in Aden, reflecting the independence ambitions of southern Yemen after a separatist takeover of the city. Last week, fighters from the Security Belt Forces ousted unionist troops loyal to President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi from what was the capital of the formerly independent south. The clashes left around 40 people dead.

Both the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) and government forces have been fighting the Iran-aligned Houthi rebels in a years-long war that has pushed the country to the brink of famine. But the two forces remain at odds, fuelling the STC's occupation of key positions in Aden before it partially withdrew under pressure from regional powers Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

On Thursday, jubilant supporters of

the southern separatists took to the streets of Aden, which has served as the Hadi government's base since the rebels took over the capital Sanaa in 2014. The flags of the former South Yemen were flown on top of public institutions and hung from multi-storey buildings, along with banners proclaiming support for the separatists. South Yemen was an independent state until it merged with the north in 1990.

Four years later, an armed secession bid ended in occupation by northern forces, giving rise to resentments which persist to this day. Residents in Yemen's second city said that while they were happy with the STC's takeover, their key concern is whether the separatists can provide basic services.

"Our main worry is who will provide necessary public services and who will pay the salaries of tens of thousands of employees," Saleh Naser said. "If the STC is capable of running the south's affairs, then we are with it." Saleh al-Hajj, donning a shirt printed with the image of STC chief Aidarus al-Zubaidi, hoped residents' lives would improve under the separatists. "There are plenty of shortages, such as water and power," he said.



ADEN: Picture shows workers returning to their jobs at Al-Haswa thermoelectric power station on the outskirts of the southern Yemeni city of Aden. —AFP

Rifts widen

A Saudi-led military coalition, which has backed pro-government forces against the Houthi rebels since 2015, sent a delegation to Aden on Thursday to discuss the new front in the crisis. The alliance has "suc-

ceeded in calming the situation in Aden", spokesman Turki al-Maliki said Monday. The STC withdrew from a number of public buildings to pave the way for talks, but they maintain control over key military positions and therefore over the city. —AFP

Sudan transition gets off to a bumpy start

KHARTOUM: Sudan's transition towards civilian rule got off to a bumpy start as generals and protest leaders fell two days behind schedule in unveiling a joint sovereign council. The body will replace the transitional military council that took over from longtime ruler Omar Al-Bashir when he was forced from power by relentless protests in April.

The Islamist general appeared in court sitting in a cage to face graft charges Monday, a sight that the two thirds of Sudan's 40 million inhabitants who were born under his rule could hardly have imagined. The very first steps of the transition to civilian rule after 30 years of Bashir's regime were proving difficult

however with disagreements within the protest camp holding up the formation of Sudan's new ruling body. The line-up was due to have been announced on Sunday, in line with a deal reached between the Transitional Military Council and the Forces for Freedom and Change opposition coalition. The TMC said on Monday however that the deadline had been pushed back 48 hours "at the request of the Forces for Freedom and Change" after they came back on some of the five names they initially put forward.

The ruling sovereign council will be composed of 11 members including six civilians and five from the military. It will be headed by a general for the first 21 months and by a civilian for the remaining 18 months. The roadmap drawn up by the generals and protest leaders in recent weeks set yesterday as the date of the official appointment of a transitional prime minister. Abdalla Hamdok, a former UN economist based in Addis Ababa, has accepted the protest camp's nomination but awaits the announcement of the sovereign council and has yet to arrive in the country. —AFP



KHARTOUM: A Sudanese man reads the newspaper headlining the court appearance of Sudan's deposed military ruler Omar Al-Bashir during the opening of his corruption trial the previous day. —AFP

Algerian protest marks six months

ALGIERS: Algerians launched an unprecedented protest movement in February, filling the streets of cities across the country and forcing the president out of office. Six months later, the movement is still going strong in the face of unyielding powers. The progress already made is "irreversible", said Said Salhi, vice president of the Algerian

League for the Defense of Human Rights and a prominent figure in the protest movement. "The Algerian people cannot go back," he said.

What's been achieved?

The Algerian protesters have "already accomplished more than many observers expected", according to the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) think tank. The greatest feat was the resignation on April 2 of president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in power for 20 years, whose bid for a fifth term had sparked the protests. In addition, several "widely disliked" regime officials and businessmen, long suspected of corruption though considered untouchable, are now behind bars. —AFP



ALGIERS: Algerian demonstrators chant slogans and march with national flags as they gather in the streets of the capital Algiers against the ruling class amid an ongoing political crisis in the country. —AFP

Cameroon anglophone separatist leader gets life sentence

YAOUNDE: A military court in Cameroon yesterday handed a life sentence to the head of the country's anglophone separatist movement, Julius Sissiku Ayuk Tabe, and nine of his followers, lawyers said. The 10 were convicted of charges including "terrorism and secession", the state's lawyer, Martin Luther Achet said. The sentence was confirmed by a lawyer for the separatists, Joseph Fru, who condemned what he called a "parody of justice". The defendants refused to recognize the right of the military tribunal in Yaounde to try them.

Their lawyers have yet to say whether they will file an appeal. Ayuk Tabe, a charismatic 54-year-old computer engineer by training, was the first self-proclaimed president of "Ambazonia" - a breakaway state declared in October 2017 in two English-speaking regions of the central African country. The government responded with a military crackdown. Attacks by both sides have left 1,850 dead, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG) think tank, while the UN says 530,000 people have fled their homes.

Colonial legacy

English-speakers account for about a fifth of Cameroon's population of 24 million, who are majority French-speaking. Anglophones are mainly concentrated in two western areas, the Northwest Region and the Southwest Region, that were incorporated into the French-speaking state after the colonial era in Africa wound down six decades ago.

Anglophones have chafed for years at perceived discrimination in education, law and economic opportunities at the hands of the francophone majority. Ayuk Tabe is part of the political branch of the separatist group that supports dialogue with President Paul Biya. But the influence of moderates waned in 2017 as Biya, who has been in power for 36 years, rejected demands for autonomy and radicals in the movement gained the ascendancy.

'Brazen crimes'

In January 2018, Ayuk Tabe was arrested with 46 other separatists in the Nigerian capital Abuja. They were then handed over to Cameroon - a move that was ruled illegal by a Nigerian court in March this year. In late May, Ayuk Tabe said he was willing to take part in talks with the government, provided this took place abroad and the government released all people who had been detained since the start of the anglophone crisis. Last month, Human Rights Watch (HRW) accused the security forces of committing "brazen crimes" against citizens, including unlawful killings and use of excessive force.

The authorities, while rejecting general criticism, have acknowledged a small number of abuses. In June, the defense ministry said it would prosecute seven soldiers suspected of summarily killing two women and their two children, a video of which was distributed on the internet to widespread outrage. The unrest has crippled the economy of the Northwest and Southwest Regions and had a knock-on effect across the country. More than one in six people in Cameroon - 4.3 million - need humanitarian aid, an increase of 30 percent from 2018, according to UN aid officials. —AFP