

At almost 90, these Irish nuns in Sierra Leone will never fully retire If I went back to Ireland they would put me in a nursing home, I'd die

By Niamh Griffin

IN SIERRA LEONE

SIERRA Leone might bring thoughts of civil war, diamonds or ebola to mind, but for one group of elderly Irish nuns the West African nation is simply home.

It's predominantly a Muslim country, but the missionary Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny have worked in schools there for over 150 years. Their project is mainly funded by Mísean Cara, an umbrella group for faith-based development agencies funded by Irish Aid. The nuns are working on a handover to local staff with support from Irish educational charity Glocal Schoolroom, but the Sisters are also reluctant to leave their tropical home.

Sr Teresa McKeown, 89, has worked in West Africa since 1954 and says: 'I am home. I'm Irish but this is home. If I went back to Ireland, they would put me in a nursing home, I'd die.' She still has a Westmeath lilt, coloured with local

'My mother arrived in furs and played bridge'

phrases when she teaches maths at the school she co-founded.

She entered the order in 1948, doing teacher training at UCD. Sr Teresa taught first at St Joseph's School in Freetown and went on to work in the east of the country.

She remembers the civil war and the rebel group Revolutionary United Front, featured recently in the RTE drama, Taken Down, feared for its brutal tactics.

She says: 'The rebels came round the area and you had to be alert, it was nerve-wracking. Even the priests were nervous. We moved into the city to stay safe.'

In the mid-1990s many foreigners left but Sr Teresa only crossed the border to refugee camps in Guinea and worked with women. When she returned to Sierra Leone, the nuns built what is now a thriving centre with three schools, a clinic and a



DEFYING THE REBELS: Sr Teresa teaching school. Right, Sr Mary with the Irish Ambassador Catherine Cambell



small village funded by a Canadian charity on land donated by the Catholic bishop. One of her co-missionaries is Sr Louis Marie O'Connor, 87, from Kanturk in Cork. She remembers arriving in 1956, aged just 25.

'She laughs recalling her 80-year-old mother arriving on a visit.

'I was at Mass one morning and they said your mother is here. She'd flown all the way on her own. She was such a fashion-plate, very stylish, so when I went to meet the car she was there with her furs, sitting in a Beetle. She went to Mass here all the time and played bridge with the priests,' Sr Louis says.

She was principal of St Joseph's School in the capital, but also worked with rural women.

'People here are mostly Muslim so spiritual development was not something we worked on. They knew we were Catholic but it didn't matter. All they needed was seeds and money,' she says.

'The UN troops used our school as a brothel'

In the town of Makeni, Sr Mary McSweeney, 75, from Donegal, says: 'I arrived to a school run by Sr Martha, a great woman from Kerry. She trained me for three days and then left me in charge of 800 students and 24 teachers. I

nearly had a fit.' Sr Mary saw disabled children were vulnerable, with deaf children stigmatised as devils. She started the school in 1979 with eight students, now there are over 250. When the nuns returned, she says: 'The United Nations troops were here, they were using our nursery school as a brothel really. I had to keep going to ask them for it back, they would eat fresh meat and fruit in front of us. I was tempted to ask for some but I had my pride. They left eventually.' In 2003 Human Rights Watch published a report linking UN troops to sex crimes in Sierra Leone.

Makeni suffered again in 2014 when ebola broke out. But Sr Mary stayed, even though she says it was more frightening than the war.

'The Irish embassy was very helpful, the new Ambassador Catherine Cambell was here last week. Ireland and especially Dungloe was always supportive,' she says.

This includes one prominent Donegal man Daniel O'Donnell, who is an admirer of the great work Sr Mary does in the school.

Asked how she keeps her faith after what she's seen, Sr Mary says: 'It's not hard to keep my faith. I am disappointed in humanity. But we're still here, and I'm fighting fit. In the Krio language they say, "We de try, small small," it means keep trying and change will come.'

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ANGER: Verona Murphy of the Haulage Association

Hauliers' fury at cancelled French ferry

THE controversial decision by Irish Ferries to cancel sailing between Rosslare and France 'makes no sense' and will adversely affect hauliers with Brexit looming, their association has claimed.

President of the Irish Road Haulage Association Verona Murphy said the decision was 'quite a shock' after receiving no contact from the company before the announcement. 'They would be well aware that

By Craig Hughes

what would be primary to Brexit would be to have the shortest possible direct route, and that would be from Rosslare to Cherbourg. It makes no sense, when we talk about customers and certainty, 21 hours will land us in France at a time when we might as well be spending two days on a ferry it would make such a

significant difference.' Ms Murphy hit out at Leo Varadkar and Transport Minister Shane Ross for their input.

'It was very disappointing to hear the Taoiseach saying "it's primarily a tourist route", it is not... but look if he's getting his information from Transport you can understand why he doesn't know what he's talking about. I was no more surprised when I heard Shane Ross say it's only an hour's extra sailing, it's four hours to

sail from Dublin to Rosslare. It makes very little sense to travel three or four hours by road, in congested traffic, to get to Dublin to come four hours down the Irish Channel, and the cost of it, we'll end up paying for it,' she said. The move has angered local businesses who benefit from the activity stemming from the port as well as the hauliers who face the prospect of having to travel to Dublin.