



A general view of the "The door of no return" memorial on the beach of Ouidah. — AFP photos

BENIN RESTORES SLAVERY MONUMENTS TO TESTIFY TO BRUTAL PAST

As Western cities see statues of slaveholders and colonialists toppled, Benin's coastal town of Ouidah is going the other way, restoring monuments to the painful era of the slave trade. During the 17th and 18th centuries, European slavers held more than one million African men, women and children in Ouidah's Portuguese Fort before shipping them across the Atlantic in abominable conditions.

Ouidah, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) from Benin's economic hub of Cotonou, was

one of the main slave staging posts to the Americas, according to research at Yale University. It ranked alongside "slave coast" ports in modern-day Ghana and the swathe of Central Africa that today encompasses Angola, the Republic of Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Benin, coveted for slave trade by Portugal, Britain and France, villagers were captured in surprise raids orchestrated by powerful local chiefs.

The renovation of the Ouidah fort and the

history museum inside is part of Benin's drive to ensure that future generations of Africans know their ancestors' suffering. "When I see these chains that hobbled our ancestors, I feel sick," Benoit Daoude told AFP as he studied a number of artefacts moved to a temporary exhibition.

'Slavery must be taught'

"But it's our history. We must accept it and tell it to future generations," said Daoude, a UN official who returned to

Benin on holiday from his posting in Cameroon. "Our children know nothing of all that. Slavery must be taught in school and more than in just a few lessons," Daoude said. He is one of a stream of other Beninese, Ouidah residents and historians who have visited the temporary exhibition since it opened on August 3. Meanwhile dozens of laborers at the fort work from morning until night to have the refurbished museum opened before the year ends.

Under protective glass in the main hall, visitors can inspect crusty old maps used by Portuguese mariners, along with guns used in the trade. Visitors can also see portable altars used in ceremonies by the long line of kings of former Dahomey, founded around 1600 and crushed by French colonialists in 1894. The museum houses a church bell brought by Roman Catholic missionaries, together with a sinister selection of chains and other implements used to bind slaves. Ulrich Lantonkpode, a jurist who grew up in Ouidah before moving to the capital Cotonou, said that before the exhibition he "lacked elements and information about the culture and history of (his) family". "I appreciate this exhibition as much as the idea to rebuild the Portuguese Fort, enabling us to safeguard this history," he added.



A general view of details on a wall at the Zomachi memorial in Ouidah.



A general view of the entrance to the city of Ouidah.