

# Ebola-hit Sierra Leone's Freetown a city on edge

August 13 2014, by Frankie Taggart

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Death stalks the rain-lashed streets of Sierra Leone's capital, finally at peace after a decade of civil war but in the grip of a new and equally deadly adversary—the Ebola virus.

Freetown may have been spared the brunt of an epidemic cutting a swathe through west Africa, but the tropical fever is the only topic of conversation in a city festooned with incongruously vibrant banners reminding people of the ever-present threat.

"We are all scared because of the way Ebola is spreading but we are taking all the necessary precautions," says Waisu Gassama, 27, who works in the HIV department of the dilapidated, century-old Connaught Hospital.

Gassama tells AFP the unit has stopped testing patients for HIV, such is the fear over the possibility that blood samples might contain Ebola.

Outside the hospital, soldiers say they have been drafted in to guard doctors and nurses, many of whom have been targeted by angry mobs blaming modern medicine for exacerbating the epidemic.

Freetown, a sprawling tropical city of 1.2 million people, on the Atlantic coastline of one of the world's poorest countries, is a day's drive from the epicentre of the most deadly outbreak of Ebola in history.

It is little wonder that the highly-contagious pathogen can propagate

panic quicker than it spreads death.

Ebola is classified by the US Centers for Disease Control and Protection as a category A bioterrorism agent, along with anthrax, botulism and smallpox.

There is no cure, no established drug therapy and no vaccine to protect victims against the lethal haemorrhagic fever which the virus causes, breaking down vital organs until they seep out of the host's lungs, skin and eyes.

Ebola has killed 1,013 people in the current outbreak, more than half of those it has infected, spreading from southern Guinea to Liberia, Sierra Leone and then Nigeria.

## **'Everyone is afraid'**

Because the virus is so hazardous, it requires treatment and research facilities with the highest levels of containment and highly trained personnel—resources which one of the world's poorest regions does not have in abundance.

The indigenous tribal villages of Sierra Leone's densely forested eastern region bordering Liberia and Guinea have seen most of the country's deaths.

Less than 300 kilometres (180 miles) away, Freetown is a city on edge, if not outright panic.

Buckets of chlorine solution stand at the entrance to shops, offices, churches—every building, in fact, into which the public might venture.

Eyes dart accusingly when someone coughs on public transport and

hoteliers demand that every guest wash their hands before entering.

Old friends, neighbours, brothers and sisters have stopped physical contact, awkwardly waving across an imagined buffer when they meet.

"We have not suffered badly yet, but everyone is afraid," said Olivette, a 38-year-old shopkeeper in the Cotton Tree area of the town centre who preferred not to give her surname.

"I make sure everyone washes before they come in and no one touches me or my children—not even other family members."

Traumatised by a [civil war](#) that spanned the 1990s, Freetown has endured its share of privations.

Twelve years after the horrors of a conflict which left 50,000 dead, crumbling, bomb-scarred buildings among the ironwood and palm trees remain a sobering testament to the country's violent past.

But Ebola—a silent assassin which strikes with no warning, killing young and old, men and women, indiscriminately—presents an altogether more insidious threat.

## **Fears of westward spread**

In a city where all the front pages, the lunchtime gossip, the television news bulletins and the public meetings are about Ebola, everyone seems to have an angle.

Posters rallying the public to the "fight against the scourge" can be found on almost every street corner, usually promoting the particular cause of the author in the process.

Beneath a revered ancient cotton tree near the supreme court, a banner bearing a crucifix and Islamic crescent calls attention to the "Religious Leaders' Task Force on Ebola".

Nearby, a poster informs passers-by that the Sweissy Jewellers Organization is calling on supporters to "Join The Fight", although it remains unclear what assistance jewellery fans can provide.

Sierra Leone, with its ill-equipped infrastructure and fragile health system, has borne the brunt of the outbreak, with 730 cases, significantly more than any of its neighbours.

The nation's sole virologist, who was at the forefront of its battle against the epidemic, died from Ebola last month.

Eight Chinese medical workers and 24 nurses, mostly from a military hospital, have been placed in quarantine in Freetown this week, heightening fears that a wave of cases is about to sweep into the overcrowded city.

Meanwhile, flash flooding in the Ebola-hit eastern city of Kenema has exacerbated the crisis, with locals voicing fears that a cholera outbreak could add to their woes.

The government says it has requested samples of an experimental Ebola drug, ZMapp, that has shown some positive effects on two US aid workers.

President Ernest Bai Koroma expressed his "utter dismay" at the "slow pace" of the international community in responding to the outbreak on Monday.

Back at the Connaught Hospital, Waisu Gassama sums up the fears of

many but sounds a note of optimism as he leaves at the end of another tough shift.

"We are really worried about it spreading from the east," he says.

"But at least the government is doing well trying to contain the virus."

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