

Freetown's slums ill-prepared for Ebola spread

August 14 2014, by Frankie Taggart

From a hillside rising high above the fetid orange sludge of Freetown's largest slum, it is hard to imagine a place more ill-equipped to deal with an outbreak of Ebola.

Kroo Bay—a cramped beachfront township of 15,000 where disease is rife and most people die before middle age—is emblematic of the threat facing Sierra Leone's capital.

"This is a slum area. We have many gutters, and bacteria and germs. We have many problems in this community, even without Ebola," says father-of-six Hassan Sesay, 38, a lifelong resident.

The death toll in the worst epidemic of Ebola since its discovery four decades ago stands at 1,069.

Nearly 2,000 people have been infected in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia.

Freetown, an overcrowded city of 1.2 million people, has so far avoided catastrophe, with most of Sierra Leone's 783 cases cropping up in the remote forests of the east.

More than 30 of the city's medical workers were placed in quarantine this week, however, sparking fears that a wave of cases is about to sweep in.

Many of Kroo Bay's inhabitants confess that they now spend much of their free time hiding in their densely-packed zinc and wood shanties.

While poverty has been their most pressing concern since the end of a ruinous 1991-2002 civil war, now they say they worry about infection.

"Everyone is feeling bad when they see what Ebola can do," says mother-of-two Moussu Diallo, 20.

"I have never seen anyone with the virus but I worry for my children."

Putrid water

Kroo Bay is home to artisanal fishermen, cobblers, tin smelters who make pots and pans from the dented metal of abandoned cars, bakers and carpenters.

Pigs poke around in the mud which passes for paving between the huts while women bathe in the open and children wash clothes in the torrential rain.

There is no electricity or running water, one health clinic and only four toilets.

Infectious diseases have a history of spreading like wildfire through the former fishing settlement, named after migrants from the Kru tribe in neighbouring Liberia who settled in the 1960s.

Freetown's more affluent residents dump their rubbish on the banks of the Crocodile River which flows past Kroo Town and mountains of plastic get washed up in the slum.

An outbreak of cholera across the capital's poorest housing areas two

years ago killed almost 400 people.

It rains six months of the year in Freetown, one of the world's wettest cities, and Kroo Bay lies at the bottom of the steep hill on which it was built.

Putrid water inundates the slum every summer and brings rats, malaria, cholera, dysentery and respiratory infections.

Life expectancy, at 35, is around 10 years below the nationwide average.

But for all the hardships of daily life, Kroo Bay has remained a vibrant, bustling, noisy place—until Ebola.

Economics student Mohamed Kamara, the son of Kroo Bay's village chief, says that while he and his friends used to meet regularly, the socialising has stopped.

"We are not moving around now. We sit at home talking about Ebola and how it spread," the 24-year-old tells AFP.

"I have to stay at home so that I don't contract the disease."

'Filled with fear'

El Hadji Abubakar, the township's Islamic leader, says people only venture out to worship, because they are "filled with fear and panic that this sickness will come".

The 62-year-old imam, echoing every resident interviewed by AFP, says the community is well educated about Ebola and how the dangers can be minimised.

Yet there is no evidence that the people of Kroo Bay are taking any serious precautions other than staying at home.

None of the measures seen in other parts of Freetown—the ubiquitous buckets of chlorine, the latex gloves—can be seen in the slum.

Abubakar suggests that people may be putting their faith in a higher power.

"People are still going to the mosque, of course. They go and pray to God," he says.

The government was berated for what was seen as an inadequate early response to the Ebola crisis.

In a particularly unedifying episode, a tourism ministry official was upbraided by the local media accusing him of urging journalists to stop reporting "negatively" on the outbreak.

Ministers have reacted with greater urgency since President Ernest Bai Koroma announced a state of emergency, however, deploying troops to enforce quarantines of Ebola-hit areas.

The prisons chief raised the alarm on Wednesday over the threat to the country's 3,500 inmates from new detainees bringing in Ebola.

No cases have been reported in the overcrowded prison system yet, said Sampha Bilo Kamara.

But he warned that there was an "urgent need" for protective clothing and training for wardens and medical staff handling new inmates.

AFP sought interviews with Sierra Leone's chief medical officer and

deputy health minister but they were unavailable to comment.

The reason—as grimly ironic as it is tragic—is that they were mourning Modupeh Cole, a leading physician and Ebola expert who died on Wednesday after contracting the virus in Freetown.

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