

Overwhelmed west Africa ramps up Ebola response

September 21 2014, by Rod Mac Johnson

West Africa intensified its response to the deadly Ebola epidemic on Sunday, with Sierra Leone uncovering scores of dead bodies during a 72-hour shutdown and Liberia announcing hundreds of new hospital beds.

The outbreak has killed more than 2,600 people in the two countries and neighbouring Guinea this year, cutting a swathe through entire villages at the epicentre and prompting warnings over possible economic catastrophe.

Most of Sierra Leone's six million people were confined to their homes for a third straight day Sunday, with only essential workers such as health professionals and security forces exempt.

Deputy Chief Medical Officer Sarian Kamara said the authorities had received thousands of calls but only a handful of new patients in the Western Area covering Freetown and its surroundings.

"We were... able to confirm new cases which, had they not been discovered, would have greatly increased transmission," she said.

"Up to this morning, we had 22 new cases. The response from the medical (teams) has improved and the burial teams were able to bury between 60 to 70 corpses over the past two days."

Liberia meanwhile announced plans for an increase in beds for Ebola

patients in its overwhelmed capital Monrovia, raising the number from around 250 to 1,000 by the end of October.

The move comes two weeks after the World Health Organization (WHO) warned the country, worst-hit in the outbreak with more than 1,450 deaths, was about to see a huge spike in infections, with thousands of new cases imminent.

US military mission

"Patients are being rejected... because there is no space. So the government is trying its best to finish the 1,000 beds so we can accommodate all the patients," Information Minister Lewis Brown told AFP.

A second deployment of US troops arrived on Sunday at Liberia's international airport, 55 kilometres (35 miles) east of Monrovia, as part of an eventual 3,000-strong mission to help battle the outbreak.

"Some American troops came soon this morning. They arrived with tactical jeeps," an airport source told AFP, without giving the size of the unit.

Pentagon spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby told reporters on Friday a C-17 aircraft with equipment and seven service members had already landed, with two more cargo planes carrying 45 personnel due to follow over the weekend.

The team will set up a headquarters for Major General Darryl Williams, who will oversee the US mission to train local health workers and establish additional medical facilities, he said.

Military engineers are due to build new Ebola treatment centres in

affected areas, Washington said last week, while US officials will help recruit medical personnel to work at the units.

The latest WHO figures show Liberia reporting 2,710 cases, but they were given a week ago, and the government's two Ebola units in Monrovia say they have been deluged by patients in recent days.

"I am here since this morning, I was here yesterday and the day before, but they keep telling me to go and come back," Fatima Bonoh, 35, told AFP, shivering at the entrance of the Redemption hospital, an Ebola referral unit.

Ebola fever can fell its victims within days, causing severe muscle pain, vomiting, diarrhoea and—in many cases—unstoppable internal and external bleeding.

'In denial'

The widespread fallout from the outbreak was underlined by India's decision Saturday to postpone plans for a summit in New Delhi to be attended by representatives of more than 50 African nations.

In Madrid, officials said a plane was being dispatched to fly a Catholic missionary infected with Ebola home from Sierra Leone.

Independent observers in Freetown have voiced concerns over the quality of advice being given out during the country's nationwide shutdown, complaining of poor training of the 30,000 volunteers giving out soap and advice.

Aid organisations and medical experts have questioned the feasibility of reaching 1.5 million homes in three days and have argued that confining people to their homes could erode trust between the government and the

people.

Joe Amon, health and human rights director at New York-based advocacy organisation Human Rights Watch, described the shutdown as "more of a publicity stunt than a health intervention".

The government said however that the campaign was "on track" in its objective to educate the entire population on how to prevent Ebola spreading.

In Liberia, health officials said action to halt the spread of the disease was being hampered by traditional communities still ignoring advice on staying away from highly infectious dead bodies.

"Some people are still in denial. Because of that they are not listening to the rules," said Gabriel Gorbée Logan, a health officer in Bomi County, northwest of Monrovia.

"And there is still ongoing burial rites—rituals that citizens are carrying out. They're in the habit of bathing dead bodies because tradition demands it."

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