

Sierra Leone faces criticism over Ebola shutdown

September 20 2014, by Rod Mac Johnson

Sierra Leone began the second day of a 72-hour nationwide shutdown aimed at containing the spread of the deadly Ebola virus on Saturday amid criticism that the action was a poorly planned publicity stunt.

Most of Sierra Leone's six million people have been confined to their homes from midnight (0000 GMT) on Friday, with only essential workers such as [health professionals](#) and security forces exempt.

Almost 30,000 volunteers are going door-to-door to educate locals and hand out soap, in an exercise expected to lead to scores more patients and bodies being discovered in homes.

But independent observers have voiced concerns over the quality of advice being given out, deeming the shutdown a "mixed success" in the Western Area, the region that includes the capital. Freetown.

"While the supervisors were well trained, the visiting teams to families in some parts in the Western Area had poor training and could not deliver the information properly," said Abubakarr Kamara, from the Health for All Coalition, a local charity.

"From my observation, many of them were too young to be involved in the exercise and in one or two households where I witnessed their intervention, there were hardly messages given to the families which were beneficial to the households."

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

The outbreak has killed more than 2,600 people in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone this year, cutting a swathe through entire villages at the epicentre and prompting warnings over possible economic catastrophe from the World Bank.

'Publicity stunt'

"Ose to Ose Ebola Tok"—"House-to-House Ebola Talk" in the widely-spoken Krio language—will see more than 7,000 volunteer teams of four attempting to reach the country's 1.5 million homes before the end of Sunday.

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".

"Publicity—or really crisis communication—is what is urgently needed in this epidemic, but it should focus on spreading information and building trust with the government. The shutdown is the wrong approach," he told AFP.

Steven Gaoja, head of the government's emergency Ebola operation centre, admitted the first day was "really very rocky" at the start, but said organisation had improved throughout the day.

"On the whole we came out successful. We feel confident that the initial problems we encountered have been slashed," he said.

He said the centre had received 886 calls on a variety of Ebola-related

issues by 3:00 pm, 102 reporting suspected cases but 238 of which were pranks.

"We have a target to reach every household in the country and the goal is to ensure that families have the right information about Ebola," said ministry of health spokesman Sidi Yahya Tunis.

"We are certain we will reach the target so people have to be a little patient."

A spokesman for the World Health Organization said on Friday a contingent of Cuban doctors and nurses from a 165-strong delegation expected in Sierra Leone would be arriving over the weekend.

From the first week of October, the doctors and nurses would remain for six months.

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