

Sierra Leone reaches final day of Ebola lockdown

September 21 2014, by Clarence Roy-Macaulay



Healthcare workers, rear, clean Ebola virus prevention gear at the Hastings Police training school, used as a Ebola virus treatment center with over a hundreds beds in the village of Hastings, Sierra Leone, Saturday, Sept. 20, 2014. Some in Sierra Leone ran away from their homes Saturday and others clashed with health workers trying to bury dead Ebola victims as the country struggled through the second day of an unprecedented lockdown to combat the deadly disease. (AP Photo/ Michael Duff)

Frustrated residents complained of food shortages in some

neighborhoods of Sierra Leone's capital on Sunday as the country reached the third and final day of a sweeping, unprecedented lockdown designed to combat the deadly Ebola disease, volunteers said.

While most residents welcomed teams of health care workers and volunteers bearing information about the disease, rumors persisted in pockets of the city that poisoned soap was being distributed, suggesting that public education campaigns had not been entirely successful.

The streets of the capital, Freetown, were again mostly deserted on Sunday in compliance with a government order for the country's 6 million residents to stay in their homes. The lockdown went into effect Friday and was set to end Sunday.

Spread by contact with bodily fluids, Ebola has killed more than 560 people in Sierra Leone and more than 2,600 across West Africa in the biggest outbreak ever recorded, according to the World Health Organization. The disease, which has also touched Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria and Senegal, is believed to have sickened more than 5,500 people.

Sierra Leone's government was hoping the lockdown—the most aggressive containment effort yet attempted—would turn the tide against the disease. There were rumors in Freetown that officials would opt to extend the lockdown, though government spokesman Abdulai Bayraytay said Sunday afternoon that no official decision had been reached.

Health care workers took advantage of the lockdown to bury 71 dead bodies by Sunday morning, Health Ministry official Dr. Sarian Kamara said on a radio program. The bodies of dead Ebola victims are highly contagious, making safe burials essential to stopping the spread of the disease.

In Bonga Town, a shantytown community near the national stadium in Freetown, some residents were upset that handouts of rice were distributed only to some families, said Samuel Turay, a 21-year-old volunteer.

The community often serves as a way station for rural Sierra Leoneans trying to relocate to the capital, and many homes are makeshift and dilapidated, with heavy rocks holding down zinc roofs so they don't blow away with the wind.



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"They expected, when they saw us, that we were coming with food, but unfortunately we are just coming to talk to them. So they were not so happy about it," Turay said.

The city's poorer residents generally use the money they earn each day to buy food, making planning for a three-day lockdown impossible, said Miatta Rogers, a mother living in the west of Freetown.

"Things are not going smooth right now. Everyone is not happy," she said. "When the government makes a ruling like this, then we all just have to abide by it, but it is not very easy."

The World Food Program provided food packages including rice, beans and a form of porridge throughout the lockdown, though they were not going door to door and were instead focused on serving houses placed under quarantine by medical teams, spokesman Alexis Masciarelli said Sunday.

The agency distributed two weeks' worth of rations to 20,000 households in slum communities just prior to the lockdown, he said.

Some residents of Bonga Town and other similiar communities said the provisions they received were insufficient, Turay said.

"People were saying that if people are going to lock down for three days, you cannot just leave them like that without food, you have to provide food for them," he said.



In this photo taken on Friday, Sept. 19, 2014, Idrissa Kargbo, top right, Sierra Leone's national marathon champion, helps volunteers distribute information on Ebola in Freetown, Sierra Leone. As a boy, marathon runner Idrissa Kargbo sprinted through the villages of Sierra Leone on errands for his grandmother and later as a coffee courier. Now at 23 years old, his times have qualified him for races on three continents. (AP Photo/Michael Duff)

Another volunteer, Kabarie Fofanah, said some families were refusing food outright out of fear it was poisoned. Both Turay and Fofanah said they encountered Freetown residents who feared the soap being distributed by outreach teams was poisoned and potentially lethal.

"I remember yesterday there was this lady shouting saying we want to kill her, she is not interested in the soap, we should keep moving," Fofanah said. "We tried our level best to talk to her but she refused to take the soap. She is afraid."

Despite these setbacks, the volunteers said they had been gratefully received in most homes.

"Some are tired of the lockdown, but most are happy because they are afraid of the virus and they want to be protected and have this country be declared as Ebola-free," Fofanah said.

Officials say residents have overwhelmingly complied by staying in their homes. Only one incident of violence has been reported, when health workers trying to bury five bodies in a district 20 kilometers east of Freetown were attacked on Saturday.

After police reinforcements arrived, the health workers were eventually able to complete the burial.

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