

Sierra Leone readies for controversial Ebola shutdown

September 18 2014, by Rod Mac Johnson

Sierra Leone was preparing on Thursday for an unprecedented three-day nationwide shutdown to contain the deadly spread of the Ebola virus in a controversial move which experts claimed could worsen the epidemic.

The population of six million will be confined to their homes from midnight (0000 GMT) as almost 30,000 volunteers go door-to-door to hand out soap and information, in an exercise that could lead to scores more patients and bodies being discovered in people's homes.

"Rain or shine, the shutdown exercise is going to go ahead. During the three days... the job is going to get done," said Steven Gaojia, head of the government's emergency Ebola operation centre.

The worst-ever outbreak of the virus has claimed more than 550 lives in Sierra Leone, one of three countries at the epicentre of the epidemic which has so far killed some 2,600.

"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 visiting the country's 1.5 million homes.

They will hand out bars of soap and educate locals on how to prevent infection, as well as setting up "neighbourhood watch"-style community Ebola surveillance teams.

The government has said the teams will not enter people's homes and are

not tasked with collecting patients or bodies, but will call emergency services or burial teams "if by chance the teams happen to bump into such situations".

Extra beds have been set up at schools and hospitals across the country, including 200 around Freetown, with the government projecting an upsurge of up to 20 percent in cases as new patients are discovered.

Shutdown 'could backfire badly'

Health experts have criticised the shutdown, arguing that coercive measures to stem the epidemic, such as confining people to their homes, could backfire badly and would be extremely hard to implement effectively.

Doctors Without Borders (MSF) warned that lockdowns may end up driving people underground "and jeopardise the trust between people and health providers".

The ministry of health has enlisted 14 burial teams across the Western Area, which includes the capital, and a fleet of motorcyclists to transport specimens from dead bodies straight to laboratories.

Community activists and civil society leaders have been recruited to help thousands of police and soldiers enforce the action.

However, the government was at pains to emphasise that it was not a "curfew", and that people would be allowed out for essential business, such as collecting water.

Health workers, the emergency services and other security forces will be exempt, along with the media and other professionals deemed key workers, while air passengers have been given special dispensation to get

to Freetown's airport.

Gaojia said people would also be allowed to visit mosques and churches after 6:00 pm, adding that "these institutions must be nearby... just walking distance".

"However it does not mean that the campaign has ended for that day," he added.

The president was due to launch the shutdown in a televised address to the nation on Thursday evening which he has asked tribal chiefs to repeat across the country.

Ebola ship turned away

The lockdown has broadly been welcomed by community leaders and residents of Freetown.

"We shall be praying that the operation will end the scourge. We support the government," said 60-year-old Samuel Johnson, a father-of-three who recently lost a daughter to Ebola.

News of the campaign has led to traffic gridlock in Freetown amid a flurry of last-minute shopping, with large crowds thronging the streets in search of cooking oil, rice and other essentials.

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

Sierra Leone had been due to carry out a nationwide census in December but the government has announced on its website a postponement until April next year.

The United Nations Security Council was due to hold an emergency session on Thursday to discuss ramping up the global aid response to the crisis.

US President Barack Obama has pledged to send 3,000 military personnel to west Africa to combat the epidemic, and an initial deployment of around 20 soldiers arrived in Liberia on Thursday, an airport source said.

The first French Ebola patient—a female volunteer who contracted the killer virus while on assignment in Liberia—was due to be flown home on Thursday, according to MSF.

Malta turned away a ship from Guinea carrying a suspected Ebola case despite requests for medical assistance, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat said.

He said it was "morally and legally correct" to have prevented the ship from entering Maltese waters late Wednesday, in spite of a request from the captain for assistance for a sick Filipino passenger.

Meanwhile Guinea said 21 people were wounded during a protest against officials leading an awareness campaign on the Ebola outbreak.

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Citation: Sierra Leone readies for controversial Ebola shutdown (2014, September 18) retrieved 9 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-09-sierra-leone-readies-controversial-ebola.html>

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