

Sierra Leone streets deserted as shutdown begins

September 19 2014, by Rod Mac Johnson

Sierra Leone's normally chaotic capital resembled a ghost town on Friday as residents were confined to their homes for the start of a three-day lockdown aimed at halting the deadly Ebola epidemic.

Streets across Freetown, a bustling city of 1.2 million people, emptied from midnight and by dawn the rare echo of rain on tin roofs and the rumble of thunder had replaced the usual blare of motorbike horns and the din of market stall music.

"Everyone seems to be complying and this is very good. This is an important way to fight Ebola. We expect everyone to stay at home," Freetown police chief Francis Munu told AFP.

Shops and offices were shut across the city, and only emergency vehicles plied streets which are normally jammed with traffic throughout the day.

Munu said his officers, covering the day in two shifts of 12 hours, were accompanying burial teams picking up bodies around the city and were prepared to protect them if they encountered resistance.

"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 over the coming days.

The population of six million has been told to stay indoors from midnight (0000 GMT) for 72 hours except for essential business, with

only emergency services, security forces and other key workers exempt.

Almost 30,000 volunteers will go door-to-door to educate locals and hand out soap, in an exercise that could lead to scores more patients and bodies being discovered in people's homes.

'Aching for a cure'

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

More than 550 people have died from the disease in Sierra Leone alone, one of the three hardest-hit nations alongside Guinea and Liberia.

The government has said the volunteers will not enter people's homes but will call emergency services to deal with patients or bodies of which they become aware.

Across the city residents waited on their verandas for the arrival of the health teams who began their rounds at 7:15 am.

"We are here to talk to you about Ebola and to find out how much you know about the disease, what you should do about its prevention and—if anyone is sick in the family—to take him or her to the nearest clinic," team leader Tommy Sackey told one family after knocking on their door in the west end of the city.

Smiling broadly, the head of the family, Sammy Jones, offered the team a seat on the porch while summoning to his wife and three children "to come listen to the crucial message on Ebola".

"The family is now in a better position (with) the disease," Sackey told

AFP after handing out stickers and soap.

Remote villages

Shipping clerk Francis Coker, who had volunteered to lead another team in central Freetown, told AFP the response to the campaign had been encouraging.

"So far the most frequently asked questions to our team have been about stigmatisation and untested drugs. It shows that people are aching for a cure," he said.

Steven Gaojia, who is coordinating the shutdown, told reporters 258 extra beds had been set up in makeshift treatment centres across Freetown in anticipation of the campaign uncovering dead bodies and new cases in people's homes.

"Six ambulances are now on standby. We have some 89 vehicles from humanitarian agencies while the Commercial Bikers Association has (offered) for our use some 382 motorcycles."

Across the country, "Ose to Ose" teams trekked bush paths to reach remote villages to spread the message.

"Ebola has uniquely brought people of all shades of opinion together," said Mamud Sherriff, a resident of Bo, the country's second city.

"Since early dawn many teams have left the city, reaching out to villages and talking to families using their local dialect."

Locals in Kenema, a quarantined eastern city at the epicentre of the epidemic, told AFP families were allowed to gather under trees outside their homes to listen to health advice.

In the northern district of Kabala, the only part of Sierra Leone not to be touched by the epidemic, residents were upbeat about the campaign.

"We are proud that we are the only community in the country that has not been affected by Ebola. We intend to keep this stand and this is why we welcome the campaign to update our knowledge," said Murray Samoura, a local herbalist.

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