

Britain slashes wait for Ebola test results in S. Leone

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British scientists in Sierra Leone say they have cut the delay for Ebola test results from nine days to two, hailing a significant gain in fighting the outbreak.

The poor country is one of the hardest hit in an epidemic that has claimed more than 5,000 lives in west Africa. Early diagnosis is deemed a key means of controlling the spread of the virus.

The British government opened a laboratory in October next to a UK-funded treatment centre in Kerry Town, western Sierra Leone, doubling the nation's testing capacity.

"It's making a huge difference for the country. We have 12 people who work hard here every day and others arrive regularly," laboratory head David Simpson told AFP on Thursday at the tented encampment.

"We will have 16 reinforcements in another two weeks. Our capacity will increase and this is key in the fight against this disease."

Scientists at the site test blood samples and swabs for the virus and can give the all-clear for Ebola patients who survive the disease.

Simpson said results for possible Ebola infections used to take up to nine days but were now being delivered in 48 to 72 hours thanks to the laboratory.

"It was a problem before because of lack of resources and very low capacity of local hospitals," said Simpson.

The Africa Governance Initiative said recently that the Ebola virus was spreading nine times faster than it was two months ago in some rural parts of Sierra Leone.

It is also "skyrocketing" in the capital, Freetown, the World Health Organization told AFP last week.

Britain pledged £20 million (\$30 million, 25 million euros) to build and run the Kerry Town laboratory, as well as two others being constructed at British treatment centres in Port Loko and Makeni.

Once operational, the laboratories will quadruple the number of tests that can be conducted every day, further reducing waiting times.

The cash is part of Britain's £225 million commitment to its Ebola response, which includes providing 700 treatment beds across its former colony.

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