

Liberians rejoice but Ebola still a threat, says WHO

November 14 2014, by Zoom Dosso

The World Health Organization warned on Friday that the Ebola epidemic was far from beaten as Liberians celebrated the end of the country's state of emergency.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf announced on Thursday she was lifting a raft of punitive restrictions on freedoms imposed three months ago because the spread was slowing in the capital, Monrovia.

"This is an indication that the situation is even better than we thought," said a rejoicing Mamadee Swaray, an entrepreneur in the capital Monrovia.

"The state of emergency was decided because of the fast spreading speed of the virus. If it is lifted this means that cases are not only reducing but there is a better future for us."

Official figures show Ebola has claimed more than 5,100 lives across west Africa—2,836 of them in hardest-hit Liberia—with the real death toll thought to be up to three times higher.

The WHO said reports of new cases had dropped dramatically in the capital but warned against complacency, saying the trend wasn't being repeated across the country.

"While the number of new cases appears to be declining, with reported cases in the capital city going down from 75 to 25 new cases per day, a

mixed picture emerges in different counties," it said in a statement.

Bruce Aylward, the head of the WHO's Ebola response team, said there had been no new cases for more than a week in Lofa, where the outbreak began in Liberia.

But transmission in parts of Montserrado County outside the capital remained "consistently high", he said as he wrapped up a four-day visit to the country.

"Despite the expressed optimism, the latest observation does not mean that Ebola is under control in Liberia," the WHO said.

"The virus has the potential to appear in waves, which can be mistaken for declining cases. While the Ebola transmission is ongoing, the potential for a resurgence in case numbers, through ongoing unsafe burials or undetected cases within the community, remains a real threat which could lead to a further epidemic wave."

Danger of relaxing

During the past week, according to the WHO, new Ebola cases were reported in almost every part of Liberia, with the highest number in Grand Bassa and Grand Cape Mount, two counties that previously had very few cases.

"I have entered many buildings and always see the chlorine buckets to wash hands, but not many people forced me to wash my hands. The danger now is that we move to a relaxed mode, instead of staying vigilant," Aylward said.

Tough regulations announced on August 6 mandated the closure of schools, the imposition of curfews and quarantines and a ban on non-

religious public gatherings.

With less than 24 hours passed since the state of emergency was lifted, it remains unclear which aspects of life will return to normal in the immediate future and which will remain restricted.

Schools will reopen "at the time that will be decided by the progress that we make in this fight", Sirleaf said, while public employees told AFP they were unsure when they would be allowed back to work.

Government officials and the business community in Monrovia have estimated a drop in foreign investment in the region of 50 percent since the outbreak was first reported in Lofa on March 31.

A high-profile Lebanese business tycoon who asked not to be named told AFP that the end of the emergency measures would encourage investors to return.

"Even our suppliers were finding it difficult to send goods to Liberia. I am confident that with this latest development things will get back on track," he said.

Meanwhile traders in the Red Light Market, the largest in Monrovia, called for wholesalers to reduce prices that were hiked as the epidemic took hold.

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