

# Rural Sierra Leone waits for help as Ebola does its worst

November 9 2014, by Anne Chaon

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Eleven months into the worst Ebola outbreak in history, the response to the epidemic in one of the worst-hit rural corners of Sierra Leone is being patched together with branches and bits of cloth.

This will be Lokamasama's new isolation centre, where the sick will be looked after and their relatives kept apart from other villagers.

"We have neither an ambulance nor a burial team," said Chief Maro Lamina Angbathor, the "paramount chief" of 368 villages in the province of Port Loko, three hours by road northeast of the capital Freetown.

He had called the town of Port Loko, an hour from Lokamasama, to ask for a burial team to take away the body of a man who had died that morning from the virus. In the hours after death, Ebola victims' bodies are highly infectious, ticking time bombs to everyone around them.

"I called and called but without response," chief Angbathor said. The military are supposed to do the job—but no one showed.

"That is why we need an ambulance here, so we can get this done immediately," said villager Abuke Kama, who was ready to volunteer himself to bury the dead.

With little help forthcoming from the central government, the chief took matters into his own hands and set up an isolation centre in the courtyard

of the village school, already closed by Ebola.

Thirty volunteers were hanging plastic sheeting in an attempt to create a controlled entrance leading to 90 beds which will soon be set up in the classrooms.

Chief Angbathor hopes it will open in a week with staff provided by the World Health Organization and the government of the impoverished west African country, where 1,100 have died so far from the virus.

In front of the only dispensary in the area, "Dr Amara", in reality a health auxillary, points to six orphans—two girls and four boys—from the nearby hamlet of Kigbal lined up under a porch. Another sister stands a little apart. All are suspected of having the virus.

## **Apocalyptic village**

The situation in Kigbal is nothing short of apocalyptic. So far Ebola has killed 31 people in this settlement of 200 souls.

As the virus took hold, its inhabitants began to divide themselves between the healthy and the "condemned"—with those with the disease left to fend for themselves on one side of the road running through the quarantined hamlet. Those who did not survive have left 64 orphans.

No new case has been reported in Kigbal in two weeks, said chief Angbathor. The homes of the dead have been condemned, and—under his orders—neighbours are not allowed to visit each nor leave the hamlet. "Kigbal is a red zone," he said, with taxis warned not to pick passengers there.

It will remain quarantined for 21 days, the incubation period of the virus.

Soon the survivors will be able to be tested and treated at Lokamasama, the chief hopes.

But for now "we have to wait for a team from Port Loko to take blood tests and send them to Freetown, where the results take a minimum of 72 hours," said Dr Kamara.

A doctor for an international relief agency, however, said the wait for results can be more like "eight or nine days".

An old man lies on a bench wracked by worry and grief. His two wives have died of the disease, and his children have seemingly also been infected.

It is now 28 hours since the chief called Port Loko for help, and still no one has come.

But he still clings to hope that the situation will improve. "The government said it will bring doctors and nurses here. When we have our own centre the tests will be much quicker," he said.

On Friday, UNICEF and the United Nations Children's Fund promised tents, beds and mattresses to support community isolation centres like the one set up in Lokamasama.

But it remains to be seen when—like the ambulance from Port Loko—this help will arrive.

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