

Sierra Leone goes hungry as Ebola targets prove elusive (Update)

November 27 2014, by Rod Mac Johnson

Sierra Leoneans are going hungry as the Ebola outbreak devastates farming, the United Nations said Thursday, admitting it was missing its much-touted targets for beating the deadly epidemic.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) released preliminary results of food security studies showing that families in the three worst-hit countries were at risk of both malnutrition and under-nutrition.

"Farmers are losing income, and that is reducing their access to food," said Vincent Martin of the FAO, which carried out the study in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone alongside the UN's World Food Programme (WFP).

"In Sierra Leone for example, 70 percent of the people we interviewed said they were eating only one meal per day instead of two to three meals, as was the norm before the Ebola outbreak."

The FAO warned as early as September of "grave food security concerns" in the three countries, with the epidemic causing farming labour shortages.

Restrictions on movement had led to panic buying, food shortages and severe price hikes, the FAO said.

The World Health Organization (WHO)—another UN agency—puts the

Ebola death toll at 5,689 out of 15,935 cases of infection, almost all in west Africa.

The organisation believes that the number of deaths is likely far higher, given the difficulty in collecting comprehensive figures and with Ebola having a high fatality rate.

It has reported a total of 3,016 Ebola deaths in Liberia out of 7,168 cases. In Sierra Leone it has logged 1,398 deaths and 1,260 deaths have been recorded in Guinea.

Chronic shortages

The latest food alert was sounded as the UN Ebola response mission admitted it was going to miss its target for beating the deadly epidemic in Sierra Leone due to a chronic shortage of hospital beds.

The UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) set a "70-70-60" goal in early October to isolate and treat 70 percent of suspected Ebola cases in west Africa and safely bury 70 percent of the dead within 60 days.

"The 70-70-60 national strategy is unlikely to be met on December 1," Amadu Kamara, UNMEER's crisis manager for Sierra Leone, told a news conference in the capital Freetown.

"We will not be able to meet the deadline because we've not been active in isolating possible infected cases by taking them to holding and treatment centres.

"There have been a combination of factors including finding treatment centres and beds for infected people."

UNMEER chief Anthony Banbury warned in October that Ebola numbers risked rising "dramatically" and overwhelming the response if the target, announced jointly with the WHO and the World Bank, was missed.

Just 13 percent of patients with Ebola were isolated between October 20 and November 9 in Sierra Leone, according to the WHO.

The agency estimates that the country needs 1,209 treatment centre beds by December 1, while just 356 beds are currently available.

Britain has committed £225 million (\$355m, 284 million euros) to its former colony and will provide an extra 700 beds by January, but supply will still fall far short of demand.

The WHO indicated in its latest situation report on Wednesday that Liberia was also nowhere near on schedule on the "70-70-60" target, with just 672 beds available from a target of almost 2,500.

Guinea is just as far behind, with 160 treatment beds available against a target of 490, but it is doing much better than its neighbours on the number of cases isolated within 60 days and trained burial teams in place.

Strangling supply

Ebola, one of the deadliest viruses known to humankind, is spread through contact with the bodily fluids of an infected person showing symptoms such as fever or vomiting.

People caring for the sick or handling the bodies of people infected with Ebola are especially at risk.

Quarantine zones imposed in the epicentre of the outbreak straddling the three countries have damaged production of cash crops like palm oil, cocoa and rubber.

The hardest-hit countries all rely heavily on imports for cereals and other commodities.

The closure of border crossings where they meet, as well as reduced trade at seaports, has been strangling supply and sending prices soaring in a region where many households spend up to 80 percent of their incomes on food.

The WFP launched a regional emergency operation in September to get 65,000 tonnes of food to 1.3 million people in the worst-hit areas.

The outbreak of the Ebola virus has sparked alarm throughout west Africa but also further afield, with pharmaceutical companies and health agencies scrambling to fast-track experimental drugs and vaccines.

Researchers for the US National Institutes of Health said Wednesday they were a step closer to developing a vaccine, with a Phase One trial showing promising results, but they added it would be months before it could be used in the field.

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