

# Survivors cheat deadly Ebola in new Battle of Hastings

November 13 2014, by Anne Chaon

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In a town called Hastings in western Sierra Leone a battle every bit as deadly as the Norman Conquest is being fought every day—against the Ebola virus.

The west African settlement has little in common with its southern English namesake, where William II of Normandy famously defeated the Anglo-Saxons, except that its people know a thing or two about struggle.

The town, a few miles outside of Sierra Leone's capital Freetown, is home to the country's only entirely locally-run Ebola treatment unit, set up in a military barracks.

The fight against the deadly epidemic, which has killed almost 1,200 in Sierra Leone, is often characterised as a charge led by western experts coming to the rescue of Africans.

So the healthcare workers in Hastings beam with pride as they stage a leaving ceremony for 63 survivors of the killer tropical pathogen.

Strung-out and struggling with fatigue after the fight of their lives, the group prepare to receive their certificate of release, part of a fightback against Ebola which is bucking the trend of high mortality rates seen elsewhere.

"We are achieving a 60 percent survival rate," proclaims deputy health

minister Madina Rahmane, who implores the survivors to "go back home and tell your story".

Sierra Leone, the nation worst affected by Ebola after Liberia, could do with some good news.

As if the official statistics weren't bad enough, experts including the World Health Organization (WHO), believe the real death toll could be up to three times higher.

Clinical director Santiago Seasey presents his survivors to dignitaries including Sierra Leone's First Lady Sia Koroma.

The youngest, just two years old, is picked up by his big brother. His mother is recovering too but the father remains in the "red zone" for the most acute cases of the contagion.

## **'Appalling statistics'**

The oldest of the Ebola survivors' group is 60, while the majority are aged between 20 and 35. Each is extraordinary lucky to have beaten a virus estimated to be leaving 70 percent of those it infects dead.

Koroma hailed the successes that can be achieved through "discipline and respect for laws" in the fight against against an epidemic of "appalling statistics".

"Yes, Ebola kills—but you have received treatment and now you are well. You are ambassadors," she tells them.

Experts believe Ebola survivors are immune to future infection of the same species of the virus, but amid the joy there is no room for complacency.

The military leader of the barracks addresses the group in the matter-of-fact manner one might expect from a soldier.

"It is your responsibility to prevent other people getting Ebola. Please abstain from sex and—if you cannot—at least use a condom," he instructs the adults.

Even though the blood of a survivor is no longer infectious, the virus can be transmitted via semen for two to three months after recovery, according to scientists.

Like graduands at a degree ceremony, the survivors cling proudly to their laminated certificates, knowing they are proof that they can re-enter society, and a key to avoiding rejection and stigma.

The survivors also get food, hygiene products provided by the UN's World Food Programme and a small amount of cash to pay for their bus fare home.

## **Dignified burials**

The WHO on Wednesday announced that the global [death toll](#) from the outbreak—almost entirely confined to west Africa—had passed the 5,000 mark since Ebola emerged in Guinea in December.

Earlier this week the WHO warned that while Ebola seemed to be under control in some parts of eastern Sierra Leone, cases were "still skyrocketing" in Hastings and Freetown.

"The number of cases is increasing in the west because more and more people are coming to the centres," health minister Rahmane told AFP.

"But we are now confident. We have reached a peak and it is starting to

decline. This message that came out from the WHO was that once you get the virus you die. And now we have proven it's different.

"Now people are starting to come out, whereas initially people were just hiding and dying, and having nighttime burials."

Dealing with the sick and the dead has become an altogether more compassionate affair compared with the panicked early days of the epidemic.

To reassure families dealing with Ebola, the government has distributed 1,000 mobile phones to patients and their relatives, Rahmane said.

"Now we are making sure (victims) get a safe, dignified burial... before people were just taken away in bags—you didn't know where or when."

But recovery remains an arduous, frustratingly drawn-out process, explains Komba Songu M'Brina, the centre's head of care.

"Some patients can recover in a week, others in six. And when they get better, they still have to wait for test results," he says.

Even when they recover, their return home has to be planned carefully and doctors only let them leave in groups.

In the "red zone"—separated from the rest of the centre by a buffer zone where staff remove soiled biohazard suits, boots and gloves—four haggard, dazed men wait to be discharged.

Already, four ambulances have driven up, sirens howling, to disgorge new patients who face their own battle.

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