

Sierra Leone cancels Christmas as Ebola crisis deepens

December 12 2014, by Rod Mac Johnson

Sierra Leone said Friday it was banning any public Christmas celebrations as the spiralling caseload of Ebola infections continues to spread alarm.

Soldiers are to be deployed throughout the festive period to force people venturing onto the streets back indoors, the government's Ebola response unit said.

Palo Conteh, head of the department, told reporters in the capital Freetown there would be "no Christmas and New Year celebrations this year".

"We will ensure that everybody remains at home to reflect on Ebola," he said.

"Military personnel will be on the streets at Christmas and the New Year to stop any street celebrations," he said, without saying which areas would be targeted.

While Islam is the dominant religion in Sierra Leone, more than a quarter of the population is Christian and public gatherings and entertainment are common during the holiday period.

Conteh did not give the exact dates of the crackdown or list any exceptions. During previous local and nationwide anti-Ebola curfews, people were allowed out to worship and for "essential business".

Under current emergency regulations, bars and nightspots have already been shut down and public gatherings outlawed but there is no general ban on going outdoors or working.

The World Health Organization (WHO) said on Friday that 18,188 cases of the deadly virus had been reported across Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, resulting in 6,583 deaths.

Sierra Leone reported 397 new cases during the week ending December 7—three times as many as Liberia and Guinea combined.

'At their wits' end'

Sources close to the government told AFP that details on the workings of the Christmas curfew would be announced shortly.

The country now counts 8,069 Ebola cases, including 1,899 deaths, according to the latest figures.

Sierra Leone has already quarantined around half its population of six million, sealing off districts across the country in a bid to combat the Ebola outbreak.

The government imposed a two-week lockdown on the eastern diamond mining district of Kono on Wednesday after eight cases of Ebola were confirmed in one day.

The WHO's national Ebola coordinator Olu Olushayo said doctors and nurses were "at their wits' end."

In the space of 11 days, two WHO teams buried 87 victims, including a nurse and an ambulance driver enlisted to help dispose of corpses piling up in the local hospital, the agency said.

The government reacted with surprise to the WHO's claims, however, saying Friday they did not tally with reports from the ground and announcing that investigators had been sent to assess the situation in Kono.

Local media said officials at the district's main public hospital in Koidu had also been taken aback by the reports.

Aiah Beyonquee, the leader of the local burial team, told the state-run Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation no bodies had been stacked at the hospital.

"On Wednesday we had about 10 alert calls for death cases in the community which we reacted to," he told the broadcaster.

"There were also five deaths in the hospital and all these were buried the same day."

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