

Sierra Leone widens Ebola quarantine

December 2 2014, by Rod Mac Johnson

Ebola-hit Sierra Leone has quarantined hundreds of thousands more citizens, it said Tuesday, sealing off a sixth district, with more than half of the country's population already under lockdown.

Tonkolili, in the centre, was added to the growing list of districts which no one is allowed to leave or enter without special dispensation, in an effort to combat an outbreak which is spiralling out of control, with 1,400 deaths so far.

"The two-week lockdown was agreed in a key stakeholders meeting of cabinet ministers, parliamentarians and paramount chiefs of the district as part of efforts to stem the spread of the disease," a health ministry spokesman said.

The northern districts of Port Loko and Bombali were closed off indefinitely along with the southern district of Moyamba in September—effectively sealing in more than one million people.

With the eastern districts of Kenema and Kailahun already under quarantine, more than half of the population of six million—in six of the nation's 14 districts—now finds itself unable to move freely.

Tonkolili, a district of around 400,000 people some 350 kilometres (220 miles) from the capital Freetown, is expected to end its quarantine on December 15, according to health ministry officials.

The deadliest Ebola epidemic on record has infected almost 17,000

people in west Africa and although the official death toll is just under 6,000, experts believe the real fatality rate may be as high as 60 or 70 percent.

The virus can fell its victims within days, causing rampant fever, severe muscle pain, vomiting, diarrhoea and—in many cases—unstoppable internal and external bleeding.

'Dead in no time'

In Sierra Leone, Ebola has infected 7,109 people, killing 1,530, by the World Health Organization's count.

Announcing the shutdown, Education Minister Minkailu Bah urged Sierra Leoneans to end funeral rites involving washing the bodies of the dead, one of the principal causes of the spread of the highly infectious virus.

"We know it is our culture but leave this out for now. Put it aside. If it is continued, we will all be dead in no time," he said.

Tonkolili, one of the most economically productive parts of Sierra Leone, has seen a relatively small proportion of the country's Ebola infections but is experiencing a continued spread which threatens its farming and mining industries.

The district sits atop the largest iron ore deposit in Africa and hosts the continent's biggest bio energy company, Addax Petroleum, while sugar and rubber production are also major contributors to the country's economy.

The quarantine echoes a nationwide three-day shutdown in September, called in a bid to find unreported cases.

Outbreak investigation teams will go door to door educating locals and uncovering cases of infection and death hidden from the authorities.

"The lockdown is holding as people are allowing health officials access to their homes," a resident told AFP by telephone.

"They are opening their doors and inviting contact tracers into their parlours and even bedrooms to search for sick people.

"I cannot say whether any sick people have been discovered so far but people are enthusiastic to put the Ebola virus behind them once and for all."

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Citation: Sierra Leone widens Ebola quarantine (2014, December 2) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-12-sierra-leone-widens-ebola-quarantine.html>

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