

Guinea schools reopen, but Ebola fears still keep many home

January 19 2015, by Boubacar Diallo

Schools shuttered during the height of the Ebola crisis in Guinea began reopening Monday, but many parents were still too afraid to send their children to classes.

Employees at the doors of schools in the capital were taking temperatures of everyone who showed up on Monday. Only those with normal readings were allowed to enter the building.

Yet many pupils remained at home after rumors flew through the capital that masked workers were seen at a school building, raising questions about how safe the buildings were.

"These masked people were spraying the classrooms without telling the school administration what the chemical was they were spraying and without saying why they were masked," said Idrissa Diallo, a spokesman for a local parents association. "So we won't be sending our children to school for the moment."

Text messages also circulated Monday morning urging parents to keep their children at home. The misinformation frustrated teams that were working to disinfect the buildings.

The schools would normally have reopened three months ago, but authorities had feared that large groups of children congregating could allow the Ebola virus to spread. Guinea, though, is now showing signs of improvement. The World Health Organization said several days ago that

the country had its lowest weekly total of new confirmed cases since mid-August. Still, rumors were rampant, and some still incorrectly fear that health workers are actually spreading the disease.

"Guinea is a lost country," lamented Nafiou Bah, one of the workers cleaning up the buildings to reopen. "We have disinfected the buildings with a chlorine solution as is recommended for hygiene reasons but it's crazy to say that we've contaminated the classrooms."

More than 1,800 people have died from Ebola here in Guinea since the epidemic first began here a little over a year ago. The disease later spread to Sierra Leone and Liberia, leaving more than 3,000 people dead in each of those countries in the months that followed.

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