

Sierra Leone president predicts 0 Ebola cases by March end

January 14 2015, by Clarence Roy-Macaulay



In this file photo taken on Wednesday, Oct. 22, 2014, A child, center, stands underneath a signboard as a family home is placed under quarantine due to the Ebola virus in Port Loko, Sierra Leone. Even as his country registered 19 new Ebola cases over a 24-hour period, Sierra Leone's president is predicting there will be zero new confirmed cases by the end of March, 2015. President Ernest Bai Koroma also predicted that his West African country -- one of three hardest hit by the outbreak -- would be Ebola-free by World Health Organization standards by May, 2015. (AP Photo/Michael Duff, File)

Even as his country registered 19 new Ebola cases over a 24-hour period, Sierra Leone's president is predicting there will be zero new confirmed cases by the end of March.

President Ernest Bai Koroma also predicted that his West African country—one of three hardest hit by the outbreak—would be Ebola-free by World Health Organization standards by May. Koroma made this pronouncement during town hall meetings this week in the northern Districts of Port Loko, Tonkolili, and Bombali.

Sierra Leone's southern Pujehun district has registered zero cases for more than 42 days, according to government statistics. By WHO standards, a country cannot be declared Ebola-free until it has registered no cases for 42 consecutive days.

Among the 19 new cases the government reported countrywide, at least eight were in and around the capital of Freetown. Sierra Leone has had about 900 cases in the past 21 days, according to WHO statistics, which also say nearly 3,000 people have died there since the emergence of Ebola.

Ebola has claimed over 8,000 lives, mostly in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. One of the biggest challenges to combatting the virus is finding all contacts of confirmed cases and tracing them, especially when little is known about where the virus is spreading. Experts have said it is worrying that some regions still aren't reporting any suspected cases.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon previously said the epidemic could be over by mid-2015 but WHO is now declining to set a specific timeline after having been burned on previous predictions. Last October, WHO expected that all Ebola patients and safely bury all victims by Jan. 1, but neither goal was met.

"WHO hopes Ebola ends as soon as possible in all three affected countries of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea," said WHO spokeswoman Winnie Romeril. "WHO is not predicting how soon Ebola will end as it would take every community to use the facilities and resources available to them."

She said getting to zero cases will take time and effort that includes immediate treatment of patients and dignified, safe burials of the dead.

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