

# Sierra Leone to reopen schools in March as Ebola retreats

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Sierra Leone said on Thursday it would reopen schools across the country in March, with the deadly Ebola epidemic slowing throughout west Africa.

Classrooms have been empty since the government announced a state of emergency in July in response to an outbreak which has killed almost 9,000 people in the region, more than 3,000 of them in Sierra Leone.

A statement from President Ernest Bai Koroma's office quoted him as saying "a timely reopening" was needed to limit the damage caused by the crisis to children's education.

Government spokesman Abdulai Bayratay told AFP ministers would "shortly announce a specific date after all modalities have been put in place".

"An Ebola task force will be attached to schools to promote best practice for the safety of [school](#) children. Teachers will be trained to effectively use (thermometers) to frequently test students," he added.

"Schools that have been used as holding and treatment centres will be washed and chlorinated before they are used."

The decision covers all state and [private schools](#), although further education colleges and universities are to remain shut, Bayratay said.

More than a third of Sierra Leone's population of six million are aged between three and 17, although in reality the secondary school attendance rate is less than 40 percent for both boys and girls.

Neighbouring Guinea and Liberia have already reopened their schools following a significant slowdown in new Ebola cases.

The World Health Organization said in its latest update that 8,626 people had died as of January 18, almost all in west Africa, since the epidemic broke out in December 2013. There were 21,689 confirmed cases.

Liberia, which had a peak over 300 new cases a week in August and September, registered just eight last week, while there were only 20 confirmed cases in Guinea last week against 45 the week before.

The figure for Sierra Leone was 117 last week against 184 the week before, the WHO said, but added that the west of the country remained a problem area with the capital Freetown accounting for 30 of those cases.

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