

1.3m back in school in Ebola-hit Guinea: UNICEF

February 13 2015

More than 1.3 million children have returned to school in Guinea since the restart of lessons that were delayed for months by the Ebola crisis, the United Nations children's fund said on Friday.

Classrooms opened for the first time on January 19 since Guinea announced the closures last summer alongside its neighbours Liberia and Sierra Leone, in response to an outbreak which has killed around 9,250 people.

"In Guinea, where nearly all of the country's more than 12,000 schools are now open, school attendance is at 85 percent of pre-Ebola attendance," UNICEF said in a statement citing government data and its own findings.

The agency has been at the forefront of introducing [safety measures](#) to combat the spread of the virus, including children having their temperatures taken and washing their hands before going into classrooms.

Ebola, one of the deadliest viruses known to man, is spread through direct contact with the bodily fluids of an infected person showing symptoms such as fever or vomiting.

People caring for the sick or handling corpses are at highest risk, and the disease is best contained by limiting exposure through patient isolation and safe burials.

A drop in new cases in recent weeks had given rise to optimism that the worst was over, before the World Health Organization (WHO) reported the number of new Ebola cases rising for the second week running on Wednesday.

Transmission remains "widespread" in Guinea, which saw 65 new confirmed cases in the week to February 8, and in Sierra Leone, which reported 76, according to the WHO.

Liberia, which has recorded the most deaths and was hardest hit at the peak of the epidemic in September and October, is leading the recovery, reporting just three new confirmed cases in that same week.

'Important lessons'

The Liberian government said on Thursday it would reopen schools next week after a 14-day delay designed to give teachers and parents more time to prepare, while Sierra Leone plans to do so at the end of March.

"We don't expect all schools to reopen immediately," said Manuel Fontaine, UNICEF's regional director for west and central Africa.

"Typically it can take up to a month before the majority of students are back in the classroom. Throughout that period education authorities will be working to ensure that conditions are as safe as possible."

UNICEF said it had been working closely with the Liberian government and local communities to develop the safety protocols already employed in Guinea.

Teachers have been trained to implement and monitor the safety measures, while soap and other hygiene materials have been distributed and mass mobilisation campaigns on Ebola prevention have been

conducted nationwide.

"Liberia has learned important lessons from the successful experience in Guinea, and Sierra Leone will build on the Liberia experience," said Fontaine.

UNICEF and its partners are handing out more than 7,200 hygiene kits for over 4,000 Liberian schools and training 15,000 teachers and school administrators in monitoring of [safety protocols](#).

The restart comes as the United States begins to withdraw a west African Ebola military mission, based mainly in Liberia, which peaked at 2,800 troops, leaving no more than 100 soldiers in the region by the end of April.

President Barack Obama said on Wednesday the mission would give way to a civilian-led drive to "extinguish" the deadly virus, as he ordered home American troops.

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