

# Liberia lifts Ebola curfew, re-opens borders

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Liberia said Friday it was lifting nationwide curfews and re-opening borders shut last year at the height of the Ebola crisis, after the retreat of an epidemic that has killed thousands.

The move comes with Liberia and its neighbours Guinea and Sierra Leone seeing new infections drop to a tenth of the numbers being reported at the September-October peak of the outbreak.

Liberia, which has recorded the most deaths and was hardest hit, is leading the recovery, reporting just a handful of new confirmed cases each week.

"President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has ordered the lifting of the curfew imposed nationwide. It takes effect beginning Sunday, February 22," a statement from the presidency said.

"She has also ordered the re-opening of all the country's main borders that were ordered closed during the Ebola outbreak."

The presidency said "health protocols" would prevent the importation of the virus through any of the re-opened crossing points to Guinea and Sierra Leone, which were closed last year as part of a state of emergency.

Almost 9,500 people have died in the outbreak, although health authorities have admitted that the real picture could be far worse as many fatal cases may not have been reported.

The World Bank said in January the economic damage of the epidemic could run to \$6.2 billion (5.4 billion euros), trimming an earlier estimate of \$25 billion.

The curfew announcement came as the United States said President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf would visit the White House on February 27.

She will meet US President Barack Obama to discuss the Ebola response and the gruelling task of economic recovery.

"President Sirleaf's visit comes at a time of critical cooperation between the United States and Liberia," Obama's office said in a statement.

## **Eradicating the virus**

The leaders of the three countries vowed at a summit in Guinea on Sunday to eradicate the virus by mid-April.

Medical aid agency Doctors without Borders closed its Ebola clinic at the former epicentre of the outbreak in Sierra Leone Friday, in a further symbol of the retreat of the epidemic.

The charity—known by its French initials MSF—opened the treatment unit in Kailahun when the impoverished eastern district and neighbouring Kenema were being overwhelmed by the epidemic.

Ebola has killed almost 3,500 Sierra Leoneans since it was first reported in Kailahun in May last year, the first case being a traditional healer whose funeral led to the infections of 14 women.

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

Tribal funeral rites—in which mourners wash the body in oil and are encouraged to hug and kiss the deceased—have been identified as a key factor in its intense spread in west Africa.

The healer's burial was in Koindu, a diamond-mining town in Kailahun across the border from southern Guinea, where the outbreak began in December 2013.

An investigation in August by AFP, later confirmed in a study by US geneticists, found she had been treating Guinean victims of a mysterious illness that turned out to be Ebola.

The epidemic exploded in Kailahun and Kenema after her funeral, eventually spreading throughout the country.

## **Transmission still widespread**

Sierra Leone has seen a cumulative total of more than 11,000 cases during the epidemic which has raged in west Africa for more than a year but no new cases have been reported in Kailahun for more than two months.

The focus of the response in Sierra Leone is now its western area including the capital Freetown, where the outbreak has yet to be brought under control.

The government launched a door-to-door search this week for Ebola patients and bodies it suspects are being hidden from the authorities.

Dozens of healthcare workers fanned out across remote parts of Port Loko district, east of Freetown, after a spike in cases attributed to unsafe burials.

The two-week operation follows a larger exercise in December, dubbed the "Western Area Surge", when hundreds of volunteers knocked on doors across the west of Sierra Leone.

The country placed 700 homes in the capital Freetown in quarantine last week following the death of a fisherman who tested positive for Ebola.

Transmission remains "widespread" in Sierra Leone, according to the World Health Organization, which reported 74 new confirmed cases in the week to February 15, down from 76 the week before.

The WHO said on Friday it had approved a 15-minute test for Ebola that should prove a fast and rugged tool in countries hit by the disease.

The test is a little less accurate than the so-called gold standard of lab assessment, but does not need electricity or highly trained personnel to use it, WHO spokesman Tarik Jasarevic said.

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