

# Liberians rejoice as Ebola curfew is lifted

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It is the early hours of the morning and bars in the Liberian capital are packed as revellers drink, sing and rejoice their first night of freedom with the Ebola curfew lifted.

For long, miserable months people have trudged home in the evenings under tough restrictions to stem the spread of an epidemic which has killed thousands and devastated the economy.

But the country of four million is slowly emerging from the epidemic, with infections at a fraction of the peak, borders reopening, children back at school and now the night-time lockdown lifted.

In Monrovia, people feel like celebrating—in their thousands—and the night air is alive with music and laughter.

"Why am I looking at the time... Beginning tonight we no longer have to be running home. More drink, more drink," cries Samuel Crayton at a bar crammed with people still in their beachwear in the Paynesville area.

Liberia and its neighbours Guinea and Sierra Leone have registered almost 9,500 Ebola deaths since December 2013, although the real picture could be far worse as it is feared many cases have not 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.

## 'We are free!'

Panicked by the intense spread of the epidemic, Liberia imposed the curfew on August 6, initially from 9:00 pm to 6:00 am but subsequently relaxed, applying from midnight until 6:00 am.

The end of the lockdown was announced on Friday as the United States said President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf would visit this week to discuss the gruelling task of economic recovery with President Barack Obama.

"I am very happy for this day. I could no longer make money. Usually on Sundays we get the higher numbers of customers but they used to leave (early) because of the curfew," bar owner Cecelia Yerkerson told AFP, some time after midnight.

"Now that the curfew is lifted you can see that they are still here at this time and don't even think about the time. So I am happy."

A few kilometres (miles) away, several young girls break into song as they wait for the waiter to bring their drinks at another bar.

"Free, we are free! No more curfew breaking! Free, we are free," they sing.

Jacqueline Dahn, 21, gets up and dances, shouting over the noise of the celebration that her newfound freedom feels like getting out of jail.

"For several months I have not been out at this time. It was like being in prison every evening," she says.

"I am very happy for the lifting of the curfew. I don't know how to express my happiness."

## Profound symbol

The restart of nightlife in a country that likes to party is a huge morale booster and a profound symbol of Liberia's recovery, but it is the reopening of border crossings that is most significant to traders.

Almost everything available in the country's street markets has to be shipped in from neighbouring countries and prices soared when crossings to Sierra Leone and Guinea were closed.

"I go to Guinea to import goods. I import clothes, rubber dishes and slippers. Since the closure of the borders I have been sitting and doing nothing," Monrovia trader Stephen Williams told AFP.

"I am more than happy for the reopening of the borders. I will resume on Monday so I can be able to send my children to school."

For cash-strapped shoppers in the impoverished nation, the lifting of restrictions could not have come soon enough.

"It is good to hear that the borders are reopened but the question here is when will we see the prices of commodities going down to where they were before the outbreak," Patricia Paye, 36, told AFP.

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