

# Schools reopen as Liberia turns page on Ebola epidemic

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Children trickled back to school in Liberia on Monday after the restart of lessons that had been delayed for months by the deadly Ebola outbreak, as the country begins to turn the page on the crisis.

The school term began a day after the leaders of Liberia and Sierra Leone, in their first trips abroad since the peak of the epidemic, vowed at a summit in Guinea to eradicate the virus by mid-April.

"Of course I am very happy to be back to school, though most of our friends did not come today. But I am sure they will soon," said Fatima Sherif, 18, at Kendenja High School, in the capital Monrovia.

"I am not afraid because everyone in Liberia today knows the danger called Ebola. No one wants to die so we have no choice but to respect the rules given by health authorities."

Fears over Ebola had kept Liberian schools closed since the July-August holidays.

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

UNICEF - the United Nations' agency for children—told AFP pupils were washing their hands before entering schools and were having their temperatures checked.

The agency has been at the forefront of introducing safety measures to combat the spread of the virus, which has claimed more than 9,000 lives across Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

All three countries have seen a dramatic drop in infections compared with the peak of the epidemic in September and October.

## **Concerns remain**

Guinea's President Alpha Conde and his Liberian and Sierra Leone counterparts Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Ernest Bai Koroma made a pledge to achieve "zero Ebola infections within 60 days" after day-long talks in the Guinean capital Conakry on Sunday.

Optimism that the worst is over has been tempered in Sierra Leone and Guinea, however, with the World Health Organization (WHO) reporting the number of new Ebola cases rising for the second week running.

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 height of the epidemic, is leading the recovery, reporting just three new confirmed cases in that same week.

Most private schools in Monrovia have decided to wait another two weeks to open, however, while attendance at state schools was low, according to an AFP correspondent in Monrovia.

"I am happy to be back in school. My parents told me to be very mindful, not to be in contact with friends too much, especially when the person has fever," said Juliet Markor, 15, a student at Don Bosco High

School in Monrovia.

In neighbouring Guinea, more than 1.3 million children have returned to the classroom since last month and nearly all of the country's more than 12,000 schools are now back open, according to UNICEF.

The agency says it has been working closely with the Liberian government and local communities to develop the safety protocols already employed in Guinea.

## **'Deadly challenge'**

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.

UNICEF said it was too early to be able to have a clear overview of how many schools had opened across Liberia.

"Typically it can take up to a month before the majority of students are back in the classroom," a spokeswoman in Monrovia told AFP.

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 International Rescue Committee (IRC) aid agency said it was providing training in some of the worst hit areas of Monrovia, where people are still contracting Ebola.

"We are gaining ground in the fight against Ebola, but it remains a deadly challenge—deadly for health workers but also for children who

are desperate to get back to daily life," IRC president David Miliband, a former foreign secretary in Britain, said in a statement.

Sierra Leone plans to reopen its classrooms at the end of March.

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