

Ebola-hit Sierra Leone to lock down 2.5 million people (Update)

March 19 2015

Sierra Leone said Thursday it will confine around 2.5 million people to their homes across the capital and in the north in a three-day shutdown aimed at stemming the Ebola epidemic.

The worst-ever outbreak of the virus has claimed almost 3,700 lives in the impoverished west African nation, one of three countries that have seen their economies wrecked and healthcare systems obliterated in the crisis.

"The lockdown will be conducted from March 27 to March 29 and will be like the one we conducted in September last year," said Palo Conteh, head of the National Ebola Response Centre.

"The government and partners are hopeful that latent cases that are now not being reported or recorded will come out."

The action, which follows a nationwide lockdown in September, was announced after the World Health Organization (WHO) said Wednesday that the death toll from Ebola stood at almost 10,200.

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

Authorities will use the 72-hour window to search out patients in the Western Area, which includes Freetown, as well as the northern districts

of Bombali and Port Loko.

'People have become complacent'

Teams of experts will go door-to-door reminding households of the dangers of traditional burials, a key factor in the spread of the virus, and investigating deaths not reported to the government.

Authorities hope the lockdown will set the country back on course for a mid-April deadline for eradicating Ebola announced by the leaders of Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone in February.

"People have become complacent and are still touching corpses, washing bodies and taking sick people to traditional healers," Conteh told reporters in Freetown.

"We are determined to bring Ebola to an end and meet the deadline set by the... presidents for April 15. This is what we are working towards."

The lockdown follows a two-week door-to-door operation February in Port Loko, a coastal district immediately north and east of the Western Area, to find out if families were harbouring patients or concealing bodies.

On Wednesday the WHO reported 150 new confirmed cases in the week to Sunday, compared with 116 the previous week.

There were 95 new confirmed infections in Guinea—the highest weekly total for the country in 2015—but Sierra Leone is faring better, according the WHO.

The country reported 55 new confirmed cases, the lowest weekly total since late June 2014, and WHO chief Margaret Chan said on Wednesday

it had made "tremendous progress" in combating Ebola.

300 quarantined

Freetown reported 29 of the infections, while 17 were registered in Bombali and Port Loko.

Authorities say the spike in transmission in the capital is centred in the east-end and has emerged from just one case.

"The outbreak about two weeks ago started with one death and in a couple of days led to over 300 people quarantined to bring the situation under control," Ebola transmission investigator Sule Kamara told AFP.

The government says the northern district of Kambia has also become a concern, with 10 new confirmed cases last week, most of whom had crossed the officially closed border from southern Guinea, where the outbreak began in December 2013.

There was also bad news for Moyamba district, which borders Port Loko and the Western Area, after one new confirmed case broke a 42-day run with no infections.

A country or region is considered to have eradicated Ebola after 42 days—double the maximum incubation period for the virus.

More than 300 healthcare workers have been infected with Ebola in Sierra Leone, and almost three-quarters have died.

An American healthcare worker who contracted Ebola in Sierra Leone is critical and 10 colleagues are being monitored for signs of illness in the US.

The regional success story remains Liberia, which has reported no new confirmed cases for the third consecutive week.

Sunday was the 12th day since the final patient received their second negative test.

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