

# **Ebola-hit Sierra Leone goes back to school (Update)**

April 14 2015

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Sierra Leone's 1.8 million children began the gradual return to school on Tuesday, more than eight months after classes were shut to halt the spread of the deadly Ebola virus.

Classrooms have been empty since the government announced a state of emergency in July last year in response to an outbreak which has killed at least 10,600 people, almost all of them in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea.

More than 3,850 of the deaths were in Sierra Leone alone, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

"This marks a major step in the normalisation of life in Sierra Leone," Roeland Monasch, Sierra Leone representative for UNICEF, the United Nations children's fund, said in a statement.

"It is important that all children get into school including those who were out of school before the Ebola outbreak. Education for all is a key part of the recovery process for the country."

The reopening had been set for March 30 as the rate of new infections slowed but the date was pushed back to April 14 with a spurt in new cases, mostly around the capital Freetown and three other western districts.

A spokesman for the education ministry told AFP pupils would be asked

to attend classes on Saturdays—part of the weekend in Sierra Leone—to "make up for lost time".

Only nine confirmed cases were reported in the seven days to April 5, the WHO said in its latest situation update, compared with 25 the previous week—a fifth consecutive weekly decrease and the lowest weekly total in almost a year.

UNICEF said it was working with the government to ensure children were safe by training 9,000 teachers on Ebola prevention, including hand-washing and regular temperature checks.

## **'My classmates have died'**

At Augustine Primary School in the east end of the capital Freetown, pupils began trickling in at 7:00 am (0700 GMT), some accompanied by nervous-looking parents.

They were met at the entrance by teachers with infra-red thermometers, who took their temperatures and enquired about their health, before children filed into classes reduced to 25 or 30 pupils.

"We are avoiding body contact and overcrowding. That's why pupils are spaced out and not clustered like sardines. In pre-Ebola times, classes were between 50 to 60 pupils," head teacher Leticia Greywoode said.

At the nearby Modern Girls Secondary School a small group of girls in striped blouses queued to register and were directed to rows of chlorine water buckets to wash their hands.

"I have already met some of my classmates in the queue but sad to say others have died from Ebola when they went to relatives in the provinces," said Mariama Gibril.

More than 1.3 million pupils—around 85 percent of the total—have returned since schools reopened in Guinea in January, according to UNICEF, while at least 800,000—around half—are back in class since the return in Liberia a month later.

"This number continues to increase as more schools become compliant with the protocols for safe school reopening. Cases of Ebola continue to be reported in Sierra Leone, but are well down from levels seen at the end of 2014," UNICEF said in a statement.

## **'Safe places to learn'**

UNICEF said it was supplying 24,300 hand washing stations in Sierra Leone, enough for three in every school, and cleaning equipment to prepare school buildings.

"Even as we put these extra measures in place to make schools safe places to learn, we must continue to maintain vigilance in the fight against the disease until it is completely eliminated," Monasch added.

It was not immediately clear how many schools would open on the first day, although Sierra Leone is expected to follow the example of Guinea and Liberia, where the return has been gradual.

Fewer than 10 of the 50 pupils at the private Jane's Kindergarten School in Freetown arrived for lessons.

"I am not surprised, as parents and guardians are playing cautious and watching developments," headmistress Sarian Conteh told AFP.

Residents in the southern district of Bo said turnout was low, while pupil numbers were reportedly more encouraging in the north, according to local media.

"Although not everything was supplied to schools on time, students were beaming with smiles as they entered the various classrooms to start," said Cyril Samai, a correspondent for a radio station in Kono, a diamond-rich eastern district which experienced a spike in Ebola cases in December.

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