

## Sierra Leone marks grim Ebola anniversary

May 25 2015

---

On May 24 last year a pregnant woman and an older housewife staggered into Kenema hospital in eastern Sierra Leone and were diagnosed within a day as the country's first Ebola cases.

The younger patient lost her baby but both were lucky to survive a virulent tropical virus which over the following 12 months laid waste to the country, leaving nearly 4,000 people dead.

Both women had attended the funeral of a widely-respected faith healer known as Mendinor, whose "powers" were renowned on both sides of Sierra Leone's border with Guinea.

The grandmother, whose real name was Finda Nyuma, had been treating sick patients in her home village, a diamond-mining town just a few hours' walk from Gueckedou in Guinea, where the outbreak began in December 2013.

"She was claiming to have powers to heal Ebola. Cases from Guinea were crossing into Sierra Leone for treatment," Mohamed Vandi, the top medical official in Kenema, told AFP in August last year.

She became extremely ill on April 28 and died two days later, according to a recent study by the National Center for Biotechnology Information, part of the US National Institutes of Health.

Her sisters, grandchildren and neighbours gathered around her bed in her mud brick house, washing her body and brushing her hair in line with

traditional funeral rites to prepare her for the afterlife. Her husband and grandson died two days later.

Ebola has killed more than 11,000 people since it emerged in southern Guinea in December 2013, spreading first to Liberia, which was recently declared Ebola free, before Sierra Leone.

## **Molecular shark**

The virus is highly infectious through exposure to bodily fluids, and its early rapid spread in west Africa was attributed in part to relatives touching victims during traditional funeral rites.

Ultimately 14 women were infected at Nyuma's funeral in mid-May.

But before they died they fanned out across the rolling hills of the Kissi tribal chiefdoms, starting a chain reaction of infections, deaths, funerals and more infections.

Within 35 days of Nyuma's death, there were 30 confirmed cases from Kailahun district, five active epidemic chains, and sporadic cases were being identified as far away as Port Loko district, on the other side of the country.

A worrying outbreak turned into a major epidemic when the virus finally hit Kenema city on June 17.

The brutality and cold efficiency of the Ebola virus—described in medical literature as a "molecular shark"—caught the city's shabby, chaotic hospital off-guard.

More than 20 healthcare workers died, including five co-authors of a study published by the journal *Science* which confirmed the healer's

funeral as a seminal event at the outbreak's explosive start.

By late summer the virus had marched into the capital city, Freetown, where it took advantage of overcrowded living conditions and fluid population movements to grow in explosive numbers.

At the peak of the outbreak in September and October last year, Sierra Leone and its neighbours were reporting hundreds of new cases a week, their health services overwhelmed and their economies shattered.

## Curse

Liberia, which saw the most deaths, gave the world hope when it was able to declare that it had eradicated Ebola earlier this month.

But Sierra Leone and Guinea have seen a recent jump in new cases, according to the World Health Organization, dashing hopes that the deadly outbreak was petering out.

Sierra Leone said on Sunday it would not be marking the one-year anniversary of Ebola—either May 24 when the [pregnant woman](#) entered Kenema hospital or May 25 when she and her companion were diagnosed.

"No official programme has been laid out to observe the day but we are concentrating on widespread sensitisation to get people to realise that the disease is still around," said Sidi Yaya Tunis, a spokesman for the National Ebola Response Centre (NERC).

Ibrahim Sesay, of the NERC's Freetown branch, said five Ebola patients nationwide remained in treatment while 203 people were under quarantine in the capital.

Many people in the Muslim-majority country prayed at mosques or in churches where clerics called for "the cancellation of the curse", according to an AFP correspondent who witnessed church services in Freetown.

"God will turn this curse into blessing," said William Kumuyi of the Deeper Life Bible Church, preaching via satellite from Nigeria to the Sierra Leone branch.

"God has cancelled this curse today and has broken the chain," he said, perhaps prematurely, to prolonged chants of acquiescence from the locals.

© 2015 AFP

Citation: Sierra Leone marks grim Ebola anniversary (2015, May 25) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-05-sierra-leone-grim-ebola-anniversary.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.