

Liberia announces return of Ebola (Update)

June 30 2015

Liberia announced the return of Ebola on Tuesday following the death of a 17-year-old boy, dealing a worrying blow to the country's recovery three months after its last known case.

Health minister Bernice Dahn told a news conference the boy got ill while travelling on the Roberts International Airport Highway and died at a village near the hub, about an hour's drive southeast of Monrovia.

"The burial team was called out to the place where he died and conducted the swabbing of the body prior to safe burial. The sample was sent out for Ebola testing," she told reporters in the capital.

She said it was "likely that we will find additional cases" following the test coming back positive, adding however that no one else was yet showing symptoms.

The case comes with the country still reeling from a nightmarish outbreak which wrecked its health service and economy and left thousands dead, just as it was recovering from more than a decade of civil war.

Liberia had diagnosed its last victim, the wife of a cured patient, on March 20—its only case in more than a month—and the country was finally declared Ebola-free six weeks after the woman's March 28 burial.

The government said experts had traced and quarantined anyone who may have had contact with the latest victim, without giving numbers.

Liberia's neighbours Guinea and Sierra Leone are both battling the outbreak, which has killed more than 11,200 people, but the coastal Margibi County where the teenager died is much nearer Monrovia than either border.

"We don't have any information that this boy went to Guinea or Sierra Leone. He is a Liberian, he is neither a Guinean nor a Sierra Leonean," deputy health minister Tolbert Nyensuah told the news conference.

"Only the investigation will tell us if, yes or no, he has been to Guinea or Sierra Leone. Closing the border with Guinea or Sierra Leone is not an option right now."

The death follows equally disappointing news from Sierra Leone, which reported last week that the capital Freetown has suffered a fresh outbreak of Ebola, three weeks after its last case.

'Gut-wrenching'

Local media reported that the victim had fallen ill on June 21 and died three days later, although this was not immediately confirmed by the government.

Ebola is spread via the bodily fluids of people showing symptoms such as high fever, vomiting and diarrhoea—or the recently deceased.

Queensland-based virologist and blogger Ian Mackay described a number of possible sources of the "gut-wrenching, but not wholly unexpected" infection on his "Virology Down Under" blog.

He said that if the boy had not imported the virus, this could indicate a new infection of a separate variant of Ebola from an animal or "sexual or other less common transmission" from someone who had been cured.

A third option, he added, was that "there may still be clusters of (Ebola) within Liberia that have been smouldering on without the knowledge of any authorities".

The epidemic killed more than 4,800 Liberians before the World Health Organization declared the outbreak over in Liberia on May 9.

The agency warned at the time that because the Ebola outbreaks were continuing in neighbouring Guinea and Sierra Leone, the risk remained high that infected people could re-enter the country.

Shocking scenes

Sierra Leone and Guinea had been seeing numbers of new cases drop dramatically but the decline has halted and the countries have been recording around 20 to 27 new cases a week since the beginning of May.

During the months of peak transmission from August to November last year Liberia was the setting for some of the most shocking scenes from the west African outbreak, by far the worst in history.

At the height of the crisis in late September Liberia was suffering more than 300 new cases a week, with uncollected and highly infectious bodies piling up in the streets of Monrovia, a sprawling, chaotic city at the best of times.

The health system—embryonic before the crisis, with some 50 doctors and 1,000 nurses for 4.3 million people—was devastated, losing 192 health workers out of 378 infected.

Schools remained shut after the summer holidays, unemployment soared as the formal and black-market economies collapsed and clinics closed as staff died and non-emergency healthcare ground to a halt.

News of the re-emergence of the virus comes just a day after Liberia announced that President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf had been congratulated by UN chief Ban Ki-moon for ridding the country of Ebola.

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