

# **Liberians still face travel headaches even after Ebola**

June 19 2015, by Krista Larson

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Robtel Neajai Pailey hadn't been back home to Liberia since Ebola engulfed the country's capital in July, fearful that doing so could make it harder for her to travel as countries around the globe clamped down on visitors with West African passports.

So it was a mix of shock and anger earlier this month when she couldn't get a visa to attend an important meeting in the United Arab Emirates that had been months in the making.

It didn't matter that she had not even been in Liberia during the epidemic. Nor did it matter that Liberia was declared Ebola-free more than a month ago.

"It's not just affecting people who are in the country—it's all of us who have Liberian passports," said Pailey, an academic, activist and author who is based at SOAS, University of London.

"This constant stigmatization of the country has implications for our post-war economic recovery and for our post-Ebola economic recovery," she said. "It's almost like we're a pariah."

The World Health Organization declared Liberia Ebola-free in early May. Still, fear of the deadly disease still reigns in many places, causing students to miss out on scholarships abroad, and keeping relatives from attending weddings and funerals.

The virus can only be transmitted through direct contact with the bodily fluids of someone showing Ebola symptoms, but many countries remain wary of visitors from West Africa. Before strict controls went into place in Monrovia last year, a Liberian-American man was able to fly to Nigeria while sick, sparking an outbreak there.

Liberia borders Guinea and Sierra Leone, where Ebola cases continue to appear, so some other countries are still screening travelers from Liberia since it is still highly vulnerable to a reappearance.

Ebola returned to Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, this week after being absent for 18 consecutive days, officials there said. A young man sick with the disease in another part of Sierra Leone ran away from a quarantine area and came to Freetown, Patrick Fatoma, a spokesman for the National Ebola Response Center, told The Associated Press.

"We at NERC are extremely disappointed and we are now actively conducting contact tracing and surveillance exercises," he said Friday, adding that as of two days ago there were 19 Ebola patients in treatment centers across the country.

The United States this week announced it is scaling back its screenings of arriving Liberians, Liberia's Foreign Affairs Ministry said, though Liberians will still have to enter the United States through one of five selected U.S. airports. They also must still leave contact information with authorities on arrival, said David K.B. Akoi with the Liberian ministry.

The number of flight options remains slim for people wanting to fly into or out of Liberia. Only one of the airlines that withdrew its service at the height of the crisis—Kenya Airways—has resumed service since the epidemic was declared over. It joins the two carriers that never left—Royal Air Maroc and Brussels Airlines. Five other carriers have

yet to resume service.

While restrictions are slowly lifting, the changes are coming too late for many.

Simankan Kouroumah's father died in Senegal but because of the Ebola restrictions he could not have his father's body sent back to Guinea by plane. Instead, he tried to bring the corpse home by land, determined to give him a proper funeral.

At the border, officials refused to let the vehicle pass.

"After a day at the border under the hot sun his body started decomposing," says Kouroumah, a 32-year-old university professor in Conakry. "I asked the local villagers to help me bury my father there. There weren't even 10 people there. He was buried like a thief or a pauper. It still haunts me."

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