

Sierra Leone announces new curfew to halt Ebola

June 12 2015

Sierra Leone's President Ernest Bai Koroma said Friday he was imposing a three-week daytime curfew in the last Ebola-hit areas in a bid to curb a resurgence of the deadly virus.

Koroma announced on state television he was imposing "with immediate effect a 6:00 am to 6:00 pm chiefdom-level curfew" in parts of the northwestern districts of Kambia and Port Loko, the only areas still reporting new infections.

People in the worst-hit chiefdoms, or areas, of those districts will be confined to their homes for 21 days, he said, warning that anyone found flouting the order would find themselves in jail for the same period.

"Now, more than ever, is the time for us to remain vigilant," he said.

The latest lockdown was called over fears that the disease that has killed about 3,900 in Sierra Leone was making a comeback in the northwest.

Neighbouring Liberia was declared Ebola-free in May, but hopes that Sierra Leone and Guinea would quickly follow suit have been dashed in recent weeks.

The World Health Organization (WHO) said on Wednesday the retreat of the virus "that was apparent throughout April and early May has stalled".

It said there were 31 confirmed new cases in the week ending June 7—15 in Sierra Leone and 16 in Guinea, where the outbreak began in December 2013.

In the previous week, 13 cases had been found in Guinea, a clear increase on the nine reported a week before that.

The pattern was similar in Sierra Leone, where 12 new cases were found in the last week of May compared to only three the previous week.

"This is the second consecutive weekly increase in case incidence, and the highest weekly total number of cases reported from Sierra Leone since late March," the report said.

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

Since Ebola spread to Sierra Leone in May last year, the government has imposed several local and nationwide curfews as it fights to halt the epidemic.

Quarantine escapees

Palo Conteh, head of the National Ebola Response Centre, attributed the recent spike in Port Loko and Kambia to "people just being stubborn and engaged in the wrong things that fuel the transmission".

"Some washing of bodies and secret burials are going on and people are taking the sick to herbalists," he said.

Amadu Koroma, a local government clerk in Kambia, said herbalists were frequently bypassing official entry and exit points to treat patients

in southern Guinea, the epicentre of the outbreak.

"People have also been escaping from quarantined homes at night and ending up in Port Loko where relatives bring in herbalists to treat them in locked rooms," he said.

A lawmaker is on bail awaiting trial for allegedly ordering the washing, dressing and burial of his 106-year-old father in Kambia in May.

The health ministry says 22 people are in Ebola treatment centres, all in Kambia and Port Loko, while 342 are in quarantine in those two districts and the Western Area, which includes the capital Freetown.

The curfew announcement came after Sierra Leone extended the nationwide state-of-emergency for 90 days on Thursday, despite calls from opposition politicians to relax restrictions in Ebola-free districts.

The president softened the blow by announcing the lifting of some restrictions for businesses to promote economic growth.

Grocery stores and markets—which had been ordered to close at 6:00 pm—will now be allowed to stay open until 9:00 pm in most parts of the country.

Restaurants, which also had a 6:00 pm curfew, have been granted an extension until 10:00 pm while motorbike taxis, previously barred from operating after 7:00 pm, have been given extra two hours.

Residents in Freetown welcomed the move, which comes as Sierra Leone's four million Muslims prepare for the June 18 start of the holy month of Ramadan.

"It will enable us to break our fast at 7:00 pm in the mosque and go to

buy food from restaurants and cookery shops after," said Alieu Sheriff, 25.

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