

Sierra Leone extends Ebola curfews indefinitely

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Ebola-hit Sierra Leone said on Wednesday it will extend curfews placed on its worst-affected communities last month until the deadly virus has been eradicated.

Operation Northern Push, a drive to end infections in the northwest, was supposed to last 21 days, and residents of chiefdoms subjected to night-time lockdowns had been expecting the restrictions to end on Tuesday.

Palo Conteh, head of the government's National Ebola Response Centre, told reporters in Freetown however that the 6:00 pm to 6:00 am lockdowns would continue indefinitely.

"I am pleased to announce that due to the successes we are seeing in a number of key areas Operation Northern Push will continue to run until we get to zero (cases)," he said.

"Curfew times will remain the same and there will be regular reviews so that we can adapt the response to meet the requirements as they change."

Since Ebola spread to Sierra Leone in May last year, the government has imposed several local and nationwide curfews in its fight to contain the epidemic.

President Ernest Bai Koroma announced in early June he was imposing the curfew in the worst-hit parts of the northwestern districts of Kambia and Port Loko.

They were only areas two areas at the time still reporting new infections, although the capital Freetown has since seen its own flare-up.

The worst outbreak in history has seen 27,573 infections in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, of which 11,246 have been fatal, according to official data largely deemed to be an underestimate.

Sierra Leone has seen almost half of the total caseload, reporting 3,940 deaths.

The World Health Organization (WHO) reported in June that a retreat of the virus "that was apparent throughout April and early May has stalled" in Sierra Leone and Guinea.

The weekly case incidence in the two countries had settled at between 20 and 27 for six consecutive weeks.

Meanwhile Liberia is experiencing its own new cluster of cases after going three months with no new infections.

Health authorities investigating the failure of Port Loko and Kambia to eradicate Ebola have blamed herbalists for spreading the virus by secretly treating the sick.

Health authorities say 1,551 people in the northwest and in Freetown are confined to their homes under quarantine restrictions.

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