

Gambia bans flights from Ebola-hit nations (Update)

15 April 2014

The Gambia has banned flights from Ebola-hit west African countries from landing in its territory, airport officials told AFP on Tuesday.

Staff at Banjul International Airport said on condition of anonymity that President Yahya Jammeh had ordered airlines to cancel all flights from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone in a bid to prevent the spread of the deadly virus.

"This decision by the Gambian authorities has left prospective passengers travelling to Banjul ... stranded in these west African countries," said an airport official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Brussels Airlines, which transits in Freetown from Europe, is only allowed to drop passengers there, but not pick anyone up."

The outbreak in Guinea is one of the deadliest in history, with 168 cases "clinically compatible" with Ebola virus disease reported, including 108 deaths, since the start of the year, according to the World Health Organization.

The outbreak began in the impoverished country's southern forests, but has spread to Conakry, a sprawling port city on the Atlantic coast and home to two million people

Neighbouring Liberia has reported 20 probable or suspected cases, six lab-confirmed cases and 13 deaths.

Mali also had suspected cases but was given the all-clear on Tuesday after samples taken from patients tested negative for Ebola in laboratories, the health ministry told reporters in Bamako.

There was no official confirmation of the ban from the Gambia but AFP has seen a letter dated April 10 from the transport ministry notifying airlines of the measures while Sierra Leone's government said it was in talks with Banjul over the issue.

It was not immediately clear if sanctions were being threatened against airlines or airport authorities for ignoring the ban.

"I went to the Gambia Bird (airlines) office in the Greater Banjul area to purchase an air ticket for my elder brother currently in Monrovia but was informed by the travel agent that they are not selling tickets to passengers travelling from Monrovia and Freetown," Banjul resident Nyima Sanneh told AFP.

"I was told that my brother should instead board a flight to Dakar and later to Banjul. My brother and his colleagues are currently stranded in Monrovia."

Business 'near ruin'

Sierra Leone had two suspected cases of Ebola but both turned out to be Lassa fever.

The country said it was not questioning the Gambia's right to take action but had no idea of the rationale behind the decision.

"The government of Sierra Leone is currently engaging the Gambian government on the issue and providing all details of the surveillance system put in effect against the disease," said government spokesman Abdulai Bayratay.

"We still have no confirmed laboratory test of any Ebola outbreak here and this has been certified by the WHO, working with our health teams.

"Sierra Leonean air passengers are travelling freely to Britain, Belgium and all over the world without hindrance."

Witnesses at Freetown's Lungi International Airport told AFP around 100 Sierra Leoneans, mostly traders, had been planning trips to the Gambia but had seen their flights cancelled.

"My business is now near ruin. I have accepted money from people planning for a wedding and I was due to return in few days time to deliver the goods but with the ban now on, I am in a jam," textile trader Alimamy Turay told AFP.

The Gambia, a country of about 1.8 million, is a finger of territory flanking the Gambia River, with Senegal on either side and a narrow Atlantic coastline.

Jammeh, 48, is often pilloried for taking unilateral and seemingly impetuous decisions as well as for rights abuses and the muzzling of the press.

In March, he said the former British colony would be dropping English as its official language and in 2008, he gave an ultimatum to gays and lesbians to leave his country, saying he would "cut off the head" of any homosexual found in the Gambia.

Two years later, the European Union cancelled 22 million euros (\$30 million) of aid because of concerns over human rights and governance issues.

A senior official in Guinea's transport ministry said on condition of anonymity that the country was not concerned by the ban, adding that the Gambia, as a sovereign state, had the right to decide which planes could land in its territory.

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