

# What a difference a year makes as Ebola zone brings in 2016

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Banned from gathering in public as the death toll crept towards five figures, the people of west Africa's Ebola-hit nations could hardly have had a worse New Year's Eve 2014.

Spool forward 12 months however and Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea are preparing to party as they usher in 2016 hoping to have seen the back of an epidemic which eventually left more than 11,000 dead over two years.

With Guinea declared free of the outbreak this week, Sierra Leone in the clear since November and Liberia going more than a month with no new infections, the region has much reason for New Year optimism.

Sierra Leone's capital Freetown was shaping up Thursday to reclaim its mantle as host of some of the best New Year's Eve beach parties in Africa as revellers scared away by Ebola began flocking back to its palm-fringed white sand shoreline.

The city of 1.2 million was deserted 12 months ago, with public gatherings and even church services banned as people were confined to their homes amid the worst Ebola outbreak in history.

The national electricity board in the power-starved nation has announced its intention to supply the country with a rare 20 unbroken hours of electricity during the festivities.

## **'No more sorrow'**

Franklyn Smith, 35, is among an estimated 1,000 migrants expected to return home for the holidays.

"By this time last year, regular power supply was unheard of as people worried too much about Ebola, so this New Year's Eve I am going to dance and party until the cock crows," he said, swigging beer jubilantly.

"No more sadness, no more sorrow—Ebola is gone."

Celebrations away from the beaches will be muted, however, as the country remembers its 4,000 victims from 29,000 Ebola cases across the region.

"We were all tormented as to who would be the next Ebola victim so this time we must give thanks and praise to God for saving our lives," said 90-year-old grandmother Sarian Peters.

Liberia celebrates New Year with hopes high it will be declared free of Ebola transmission in mid-January, after discharging its last two patients on December 3.

Francis Karteh, the chief medical officer and head of the Ebola incident management team, said the climate of fear gripping the country 12 months ago was largely absent.

"There will be no specific measures in various places of gathering as it was the case last year," he told AFP.

## **'Au revoir, Ebola'**

Churches in Monrovia, closed last year with the crisis just passing its peak, are expected to be packed in the Christian-majority country.

"I am going to church tonight with my entire family, first to tell God thank you for saving our lives during the Ebola crisis, and to ask God to continue protecting the family from the deadly disease," said Mary Bono, 56.

Alfred Wesseh, 25, told AFP he would also be attending a church service but added that he would find time to celebrate in a less pious way afterwards, with bars that were shuttered last New Year's Eve expecting a roaring trade.

"From church we are going to a club to wait for the new year to show its face. This is just a prelude," he told AFP as he sat drinking with friends at a bar in downtown Monrovia.

Guinea celebrated early with "Bye bye, au revoir Ebola", a concert in the former French colony's capital Conakry on Wednesday bringing together a host of African stars including Senegalese singer-songwriter Youssou N'Dour.

"Today, after long months of relentless work, with the heroic mobilisation of our Guinean personnel and the indispensable support of the international community, we are beginning to turn the page on Ebola," President Alpha Conde told the jubilant crowd.

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