

Beat: Health

Sierra Leone declares state of emergency as Ebola toll hits 729

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USPA News - Sierra Leone's president declared a state of emergency Thursday and banned public gatherings in an effort to stop the ongoing Ebola outbreak that has already claimed 729 lives in West Africa. Liberia has also announced further measures to fight the disease.

Sierra Leonean President Ernest Bai Koroma, in an address to the nation, said he was declaring a state of emergency in order to take a "more robust approach" to deal with the outbreak. He said he would cancel his trip to the upcoming U.S.-African Leaders Summit in Washington, D.C. next week to meet with Guinean and Liberian leaders to discuss a sub-regional strategy. "The disease is beyond the scope of any one country, or community, to defeat," Koroma said. "It's social, economic, psychological and security implications require scaling up measures at international, national, inter-agency and community levels. Extraordinary challenges require extraordinary measures." Koroma said he will chair the newly-established Presidential Task Force on Ebola to implement a national response plan, which includes establishing quarantine zones in areas where Ebola cases have been found. He said police and the armed forces will be deployed to prevent people from leaving such zones. "Localities and homes where the disease is identified will be quarantined until cleared by medical teams," the president said. "Active surveillance and house-to-house searches shall be conducted to trace and quarantine Ebola victims and suspects. Mayors, chairmen of councils and councilors are hereby required to support Ebola control measures in their local government areas." As part of the measures, public meetings and gatherings in the country have been banned, with the exception of essential meetings relating to Ebola sensitization and education. All deaths in the country must also be reported to the government before burial, and new protocols for arriving and departing passengers have been implemented at Lungi International Airport. "These measures will initially be implemented for a period of 60 to 90 days, and subsequent measures will be announced as and when necessary," Koroma said. "I also hereby declare Monday, August 4, 2014, a National Stay at Home Day for Family Reflection, Education and Prayers on the Ebola outbreak." Addressing citizens, the president emphasized Ebola is a real threat, and those who seek treatment early boost their chances of survival. "Sierra Leone is in a great fight. We are a resilient people," he said. "We must not fail. The sustainability of our actions for prosperity depends on winning this fight. Failure is not an option. We all need to come together to win this battle." Meanwhile, in neighboring Liberia, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf announced on late Wednesday that all schools in the country are ordered closed until further notice. All markets in border areas have also been closed, and Sirleaf urged all citizens to stay away from public amusement and entertainment centers. "Friday, August 1, is declared a non-working day and is to be used for the disinfection and chlorination of all public facilities," she said. "Increase in prices of sanitation commodities used in this fight will be treated as an offense against the people of Liberia. The Ministry of Commerce is directed to enforce this order." In addition, Sirleaf said all non-essential government staff will be placed on a 30-day compulsory leave to avoid Ebola from spreading. "Ebola is real. Ebola is contagious. And Ebola kills. All of us must all take extra measures to keep ourselves safe," the president said. "The sooner we unite in fighting this disease, as I know we can, where each of us will play our part, the sooner we will overcome this disease and return ourselves to how we have always lived." The new measures in Sierra Leone and Liberia come as the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the death toll from Ebola in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, had reached 729, an increase of 57 in a four-day period ending last Sunday. A total of 122 new cases were also reported in the same period, the majority of them in Liberia (80) and Guinea (33). Sirleaf already announced sweeping measures last week, ordering the closure of all the country's borders with the exception of major entry points. She also banned public gatherings, ordered the installation of sanitization services in public places, and ordered outbreak centers to be quarantined. The current outbreak features the Zaire strain of the Ebola virus, which is considered the most aggressive and deadly strain, killing more than 9 out of 10 affected on average. With now 1,323 suspected and confirmed cases in the region, including 729 deaths, the outbreak is the worst ever of its kind. Ebola is a highly infectious disease and kills its victims in a very short time, though the virus can easily be confused with many other diseases. The signs and symptoms include high grade fever, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, headache, measles-like rash, red eyes, and in some cases bleeding from body openings. The virus, for which there is no cure or vaccine, can spread through direct contact with body fluids such as saliva, blood, stool, vomit, urine, and sweat but also through soiled linen used by an infected person. It can also spread by using skin piercing instruments previously used by an infected person or by touching the body of a person who died of Ebola. It is not airborne. The first outbreak of Ebola in 1976 in Zaire - which is now the Democratic Republic of Congo - had been the deadliest until the current outbreak, killing at least 280 people and sickening 38 others, putting the fatality rate at 88 percent. The Ebola outbreak in Uganda in 2000 had long been the largest ever recorded, killing 224 people and sickening at least 201 others.

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