

Beat: Health

Liberia lifts state of emergency as Ebola spread slows

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USPA News - Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf lifted the state of emergency on Thursday and said the national curfew would be reduced by one hour, citing progress in the fight against the deadly Ebola virus that has killed more than 2,800 people in the African country alone. Sirleaf, in an address to the nation, said all Liberians can be proud of the progress made and expressed her hope that the country's Ebola outbreak will be over by Christmas.

She said she would allow the state of emergency to expire, delay the start of the daily curfew by one hour to midnight, and allow weekly and border markets to reopen. "The nation was shaken by this strange and dangerous enemy," the president said. "Amid the clamor and criticism, we remained calm and undeterred. We acted decisively: closing borders, imposing curfew, ordering quarantines, closing schools, and restricting public gatherings. ... Today, we can all be proud of the progress." Sirleaf added: "It is our estimation, and that of those with whom we have consulted, the progress we have witnessed, coupled with the various measures and ongoing interventions - all of which can be continuously adopted and sustained under the relevant provisions of the public health law - have combined to re-position our efforts to sustain the fight against the virus until it is finally eradicated from our country." The president's decision to end the state of emergency comes after the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that the spread of Ebola has continued to slow down in Liberia, while steep increases persist in Sierra Leone. But the health organization also warned that a reversal of the trend in Liberia is possible, adding that disease control efforts remain critical, particularly in the capital Monrovia. "Notwithstanding these gains, a number of our compatriots are still lying in ETUs, hot-spots are springing up in rural areas, and many of our compatriots are still dying of Ebola," Sirleaf said in Thursday's address. "We also know that Liberia cannot be declared Ebola-free until our neighbors are also Ebola-free. This means that we cannot let down our guard nor can we afford to reduce our vigilance." Sirleaf, who has led the nation since January 2006 and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, said longer curfews would continue in places close to Ebola hotspots. She added that, upon the passage of the fiscal budget, school authorities will organize people to start the renovation and clean-up of school facilities in preparation for the opening of schools at a later date. Earlier this month, UN envoy Anthony Banbury, who coordinates the global response to West Africa's Ebola outbreak, said the improvement in some areas was the result of communities, governments and international partners working together. But he said it is going to be "extremely difficult" to get the number of cases down to zero, emphasizing the need to stay vigilant. "We just now need to stay vigilant [and] not for a moment let our guard down. We can't even for a second think that everything is okay," Banbury said. "As long as there is one case of Ebola in any country, it is a threat not only to that country, it is a threat to the region and the world." The current Ebola outbreak in West Africa is believed to have started in Guinea in December 2013 but was not detected until March, after which it spread to Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Mali. The outbreak features the Zaire strain of the Ebola virus, which is considered to be the most aggressive and deadly strain, having killed up to 9 out of 10 infected in previous outbreaks. As of November 12, at least 14,098 people have been infected with Ebola since the outbreak began, including 5,160 people who have died of the disease, according to health authorities in the countries involved. Liberia has been the worst hit country with at least 6,822 cases including 2,836 deaths, but authorities believe the actual figures are far higher. Ebola is a highly infectious disease and kills its victims in a very short time. 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 ongoing outbreak is the worst ever of its kind and coincides with an unrelated Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo. 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.

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