

SIERRA LEONE LABOUR CONGRESS UP-DATE ON THE EBOLA DISEASE ON WORKERS IN SIERRA LEONE

BACKGROUND

On May 25th 2014 the government of Sierra Leone through the Ministry of Health and Sanitation declared an outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in Sierra Leone following the laboratory confirmation of a suspected case from Kailahun District. The District is located in the eastern region of Sierra Leone, sharing borders with Guinea and Liberia.

This outbreak appears to be a spillover from the on-going outbreak in Guinea and Liberia since March 2014. As of 4th September, 2014 the country recorded a total number of 1,179 Ebola confirmed cases and 404 confirmed deaths nationwide.

The Government has been working with partners to establish and implement response measures for EVD outbreak. Despite the implementation of these measures the EVD outbreak continues to spread in the country.

The President, Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma in his initial broadcast to the nation on 30th July, 2014 proclaimed a state of Public Health Emergency to enable the government and its partners take more robust approach to deal with the Ebola outbreak. He established a Presidential task force to champion the implementation of various measures to fight the disease.

Pursuant to Section 29 (5) of the Constitution of Sierra Leone Act No. 6 of 1991, the President announced the following regulations to complement the measures already in force.

- Commercial motor bike riders in all parts of the country should operate from 7 am to 7 pm daily.
- All night clubs, Cinemas and Videos centres should stop their activities with immediate effect.
- All mushroom hospitals and clinics should stop their operations with immediate effect.
- All Ebola deceased should be buried in the areas where they died and all such burial should be reported to the Ministry of Health and sanitation which will give necessary clearance. Death certificates must be issued before burials.
- The Sierra Leone Police should organize regular patrols to prevent armed robbery and other illegal activities including the unauthorized movement of Ebola infected persons.
- Emergency operations centers (EOCs) at District Level should be activated with immediate effect.
- No public gatherings are allowed expect for those gear toward Ebola sensitization.
- All means of transportation to the epicenters of the disease are restricted.

- Donor partners are immediately co-opted to be members of the Presidential Task Force and
- All relevant authorities and the general public are admonished to strictly adhere to these regulations

On August 4, 2014 a National Stay Home by all citizens was observed throughout the country to reflect on the impact of the Ebola disease. Also, during the month of August 2014, Parliament passed into law the Public Health Amendment Act, 2014 to allow enforcement of new Public Health Regulations.

The government has ordered the use of Chlorine solution for the washing of hands prior to access to all public facilities including banks, insurance facilities, telecom company facilities, health facilities and other corporate and private offices as well as in homes. The situation has become very alarming. The government therefore intends to shut down the country for three days (19th – 21st September, 2014) for people to stay home in order to carry out a nationwide house-to-house check that would employ 21,000 trained personnel who would have to detect early signs of the Ebola disease. The above notwithstanding, three senior medical doctors have died as a result of being infected with the Ebola virus during the course of their work. In addition to this, about forty five front line nurses and other EOC attendants have been infected and died of the virus at the time of the preparation of this report. It is sad to see loved ones die and buried like paupers with no family members allowed to see their remains. It's a serious matter though!

SOCIO – ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF COMBATING THE EBOLA DISEASE

1. The declaration of a public health emergency on 30th July 2014 continues to create fear and panic amongst majority of the people of this country.
2. With the declaration of a state of public health emergency, prices of goods and services have increased considerably, making life very difficult for most people including both public and informal sector workers.
3. Two districts (Kailahun and Kenema in the eastern region) have been quarantined (people are not allowed to go and out except essential staff and goods).
4. Measures regarding public transportation is another area that is impacting on the people- especially workers, traders and ordinary citizens who travel mostly in buses, mini buses and taxis to the city - to transact their businesses with the reduction in the services provided by the commercial bike riders (7 am – 7pm

daily), taxis and other public transport owners have unilaterally increased fares much to the discomfort of commuters. In addition, there is now a reduction in the number of passengers carried by buses and taxis posing serious challenge to passengers.

5. The banking sector has also been affected by the Ebola crisis through the delivery of its services that have been scaled down from the normal 9 am to 3:30 pm to between 9 am to 1:30 pm Mondays to Fridays.
6. The closure of entertainment centres continues to pose a big challenge to the youths who normally would go to video centres to watch films and football among others.
7. The declaration of a state of public health emergency has also affected the tourism industry, with significant drops in their operations, due mainly to cancellation of flights into the country, as well as activities undertaken by hotels that are sponsored by business outlets.
8. The restriction on movement of people in some parts of the country continues to affect them both socially and economically, as most people including petty traders, depend on doing businesses of all sorts in the now quarantined Ebola districts of Kailahun and Kenema.
9. What is even more worrying about the Ebola crisis is that no pronouncement has yet been made about the date for the re-opening of schools and colleges for the 2014/2015 academic year.

IMPACT OF EBOLA OUTBREAK ON THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

The Ebola epidemic in the country has accounted for enormous negative impact on all facets of life including the labour movement. The labour movement has been hard hit as workers in both the formal and informal sectors are adversely affected in several ways. The informal economy workers have been affected in terms of being exposed to the disease due to the type of work they do. A good number of their members have been victims of the virus and accounted for several deaths.

Specifically, the Sierra Leone Traders Union has recorded a death toll of 87 as of 14th August, 2014 countrywide. The normal daily and weekly marketing days' activities at specific places have been banned nationwide by Government. There is also minimal access to funds from the banks due to the restricted opening and closing hours of banking operations.

The epidemic has also impacted on the Commercial motor bike Riders whose operation has been limited from 7:00am to 7:00pm. This means a considerable loss of income to them.

The motor drivers are also not left out the group of affected workers in the country by the outbreak of the Ebola disease. As a result of the restriction of movement of people from one place to the other and the continued quarantining of places, drivers can no longer commute passengers from place to place.

As a result of the effects of the Ebola epidemic on both the commercial motor bike riders and motor drivers especially the death of their members, have jointly on 8th September, 2014 issued out a press statement pointing out the total number of deaths (Bike Riders 14 and Motor Drivers 28) countrywide among their ranks with an intention of halting their operations for two weeks.

The artisanal fishermen have recorded low catch because of limited period of staying at sea. In spite of this, there has also been a huge spoilage of the limited catch due to low demand as people movement has been restricted and market centres are not fully operational in the country.

Since the outbreak of the epidemic in Sierra Leone, the mostly affected sector in terms of exposure, deaths, displacement, and stigmatization by communities is the health sector. According to statistics so far, a total number of 48 health workers (nurses, Laboratory technicians, porters, burial teams and including three Doctors). The health sector has been colossally devastated with low morale among health workers. There are reported cases of harassment and forceful eviction from homes by landlord for being considered as Ebola virus carriers.

In carrying out their work in combating the Ebola virus and care giving to infected persons, health workers are being constraint by inadequate supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Where they are being supplied, cases of substandard PPE have been reported and this has accounted for health personnel contracting the virus in the course of their duty. As the Ebola disease is a new phenomenon in the country, it required training for health personnel in handling affected persons. Hence, the high toll of death on health personnel of recent times.

The Municipal Workers Union has also recorded 25 deaths of members in two districts.

Memberships of unions operating in the manufacturing, tourism, agriculture, fisheries and mines have suffered either redundancy or pay cuts. The outbreak of the epidemic has accounted for the partial or complete closure of some business institutions that normally provide employment for their members. According to the General Secretary of the Security Union, KBJ Conteh, the redundancy rate of their members has reached about 45% since March, 2014.

The outbreak of the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone since May 2014 has also hard hit the tourism industry adversely. This epidemic has accounted for about 98% of checkouts in all

hotels nationwide due to the cancellation of flights from and to Sierra Leone. The obvious effect of this in the tourism industry is “bad business,’ to be simply put. It has increased the cost of running a hotel per day, yet the income is nothing to write home about.

In light of the above, the Sierra Leone Labour Congress is seeking humanitarian assistance from all our partners and colleagues to support the following as an immediate intervention:

- Sensitization and training of general membership on Ebola preventive measures nationwide and contact tracing
- The provision of special assistance to health workers in the form of Personal Protective Equipment.
- Assistance to member homes that has been quarantined due to the Ebola
- Financial assistance to SLLC solidarity fund to cater for both infected workers and family members of Ebola deceased workers