

Liberia declares state of emergency as Ebola toll hits 932

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USPA News - Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf declared a state of emergency late Wednesday, saying extraordinary measures are required to combat the world's worst ever Ebola outbreak that has now claimed at least 932 lives in West Africa. Sirleaf, in a statement released by the presidency on early Thursday, said the scale of the Ebola outbreak is exceeding the capacity and statutory responsibility of any one government agency or ministry.

"The Government and people of Liberia require extraordinary measures for the very survival of our state and for the protection of the lives of our people," she said. Liberia had already taken a number of wide-ranging actions in recent weeks in an effort to stop the Ebola outbreak, but an update released by the World Health Organization (WHO) on Wednesday showed the deadly disease is still spreading fast, particularly in Liberia and Sierra Leone. New cases have also been reported in Nigeria and Guinea, and a Saudi man who died at a Jeddah hospital after traveling to Liberia is also being tested for Ebola. "By the virtue of the powers vested in me as President of the Republic of Liberia, I ... hereby declare a State of Emergency throughout the Republic of Liberia effective as of August 6, 2014, for a period of 90 days," Sirleaf said. "Under this State of Emergency, the Government will institute extraordinary measures, including, if need be, the suspension of certain rights and privileges." Sirleaf, who has led the nation since January 2006 and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, did not say which rights and privileges may be affected. Liberia has already closed all of its schools until further notice, ordered the closure of all markets in border areas, and all non-essential government staff have been placed on a 30-day compulsory leave. Most of the country's border crossings have been closed and communities affected by Ebola have been put in quarantine with armed forces preventing people from leaving. "Despite these and other continuing efforts, the threat continues to grow," Sirleaf said in Thursday's statement. "Ignorance, poverty, as well as entrenched religious and cultural practices, continue to exacerbate the spread of the disease especially in the counties. The actions allowed by the statutes under the public health law are no longer adequate to deal with the Ebola epidemic in as comprehensive and holistic as the outbreak requires." Sirleaf added: "The health care system in the country is now under immense strain and the Ebola epidemic is having a chilling effect on the overall health care delivery. Out of fear of being infected with the disease, health care practitioners are afraid to accept new patients, especially in community clinics all across the country. Consequently, many common diseases which are especially prevalent during the rainy season, such as malaria, typhoid and common cold, are going untreated and may lead to unnecessary and preventable deaths." Last week, Sierra Leonean President Ernest Bai Koroma also declared a state of emergency and banned public gatherings in an effort to stop the ongoing Ebola outbreak. Among the measures, quarantine zones have been established and armed forces have been deployed to enforce them. House-to-house searches have also been authorized to find Ebola victims. The new measures in Liberia come as the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the death toll from Ebola in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria combined has reached 932, an increase of 45 deaths during a two-day period which ended on Monday. A total of 108 new cases were reported during the same period, the majority of them in Liberia (48) and Sierra Leone (45). The current outbreak features the Zaire strain of the Ebola virus, which is considered the most aggressive and deadly strain, having killed up to 9 out of 10 infected in previous outbreaks. With now 1,711 suspected and confirmed cases in the region, including 932 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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