

Title: Curfews to Help Stop the Spread of Ebola in Sierra Leone

Activities: Enforce curfews; Enforce social distancing measures of infectious patients; Diagnose cases

Stakeholders: Médecins Sans Frontières; World Health Organization; National and subnational law enforcement

Phases: Early response; Intervention

Years: 2014-2015

Countries: Sierra Leone

Agent: Ebola

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In 2014, the Ebola virus hit Sierra Leone and the two surrounding countries of Guinea and Liberia, with about 500 lives claimed in Sierra Leone by September.¹ As a result of the concerns about the growing epidemic, the government decided to impose a curfew for three days from September 19th to the 21st, 2014.

The curfew involved 30,000 volunteers with a variety of backgrounds to accomplish several goals.² Some volunteers, such as community activists and leaders in civil society, worked with law enforcement to help enforce the curfew. Health workers were tasked with the door-to-door evaluations of families' health, trying to identify cases, including patients hesitant to seek out medical resources. Other volunteers were tasked with giving out sanitation supplies, such as bars of soap, and information about prevention to help further limit the spread of the disease.³

In the days leading up to the curfew, the public and international actors were weary of the curfew and its consequences for the population. Those directly impacted by the Ebola virus and local leaders viewed the curfew as favorable. To these stakeholders, the curfew was a method of quarantine that also helped provide the necessary education to prevent its spread. Medical experts and groups like Médecins sans Frontières, however, doubted the potential for success and

¹ "Sierra Leone Readies for Controversial Three-Day Nationwide Ebola Curfew," September 18, 2014, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/africa/sierra-leone-readies-for-controversial-three-day-nationwide-ebola-curfew>.

² Umaru Fofana, "Sierra Leone Wraps up Three-Day Ebola Lockdown," Reuters, September 21, 2014, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-health-ebola-leone/sierra-leone-wraps-up-three-day-ebola-lockdown-idUKKBN0HG0NW20140921>.

³ "Sierra Leone Readies for Controversial Three-Day Nationwide Ebola Curfew," September 18, 2014, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/africa/sierra-leone-readies-for-controversial-three-day-nationwide-ebola-curfew>.

were hesitant about the impact.⁴ The logistics of coordinating 1.5 million home visits required immense effort.⁵ Part of the fear was that a mandatory curfew would be viewed as coercive, and may decrease trust between the citizens and the authorities.⁶

The day after the curfew ended, September 22nd, many news sources and government officials deemed the lockdown as a success, citing the compliance by the general population. The Health Minister of Sierra Leone, Abubakarr Fofanah, said that about 80% of the homes were visited in the three days.⁷ From those visits, 130 new cases were found, 39 more suspected cases were discovered, and 100 infected deceased bodies were buried to prevent further spread.⁸ Some volunteers, though, felt that the curfew and consequent home visits demonstrated the lack of health capacities of the government, and also decreased trust held by some Sierra Leoneans since there was no cure or treatment for the disease.⁹

Despite the relative success of the lockdown and curfew in September of 2014, Sierra Leone experienced a resurgence of cases in March of 2015. By June 2015, there were spikes of cases concentrated in the north east region of the country, in between Freetown and Guinea. The location of the outbreak suggested continuing problems with migration and travel spreading the virus.¹⁰

As a result of the growing Ebola presence, the President of Sierra Leone, Ernest Bai Koroma, declared a curfew and restriction of movement on Friday, June 5th during the hours of 6 pm to 6 am for two of the districts most affected—Kambia and Port Loko.¹¹ The curfew lasted for 21 days. During this time, military officials patrolled the hours during the curfew to make sure that no travel occurred between regions and also watched to prevent ritual burials, which could have increased infection. Restaurants and other businesses stayed open during the day, but they had to check every person for a fever upon entrance as a safeguard.¹²

⁴ Umaru Fofana, "Sierra Leone Wraps up Three-Day Ebola Lockdown," Reuters, September 21, 2014, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-health-ebola-leone/sierra-leone-wraps-up-three-day-ebola-lockdown-idUKKBN0HG0NW20140921>.

⁵ "Sierra Leone Readies for Controversial Three-Day Nationwide Ebola Curfew," September 18, 2014, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/africa/sierra-leone-readies-for-controversial-three-day-nationwide-ebola-curfew>.

⁶ "Sierra Leone Readies for Controversial Three-Day Nationwide Ebola Curfew," September 18, 2014, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/africa/sierra-leone-readies-for-controversial-three-day-nationwide-ebola-curfew>.

⁷ Agence France-Presse, "Sierra Leone Ebola Lockdown Found at Least 200 Infected, Dead: Government," NDTV.com, September 22, 2014, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/sierra-leone-ebola-lockdown-found-at-least-200-infected-dead-government-669234>.

⁸ "Sierra Leone Records 130 New Ebola Cases during Three-Day Lockdown," Reuters, September 22, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-ebola-leone/sierra-leone-records-130-new-ebola-cases-during-three-day-lockdown-idUSKBN0HG0NW20140922>.

⁹ "Ebola Outbreak: Sierra Leone Lockdown Declared 'Success'," BBC News, September 22, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-29305591>.

¹⁰ "Sierra Leone Enforces Curfew as Ebola Virus Resurfaces in North West," DW, June 13, 2015, <https://www.dw.com/en/sierra-leone-enforces-curfew-as-ebola-virus-resurfaces-in-north-west/a-18514943>.

¹¹ "Sierra Leone Imposes Curfew after Spike in Ebola Cases," Al Jazeera, June 13, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/sierra-leone-imposes-curfew-spike-ebola-cases-150613013655348.html>.

¹² "Sierra Leone Enforces Curfew as Ebola Virus Resurfaces in North West," DW, June 13, 2015, <https://www.dw.com/en/sierra-leone-enforces-curfew-as-ebola-virus-resurfaces-in-north-west/a-18514943>.

The second curfew was not deemed very effective, particularly in regard to preventing unsafe burials. The population did not understand the reason for the rules of curfew and the limitations on burials, and thus they disobeyed whenever possible. Some professionals, such as Sierra Leone's Oxfam director, Thynn Thynn Hlaing, recommended that to make measures like curfews effective, the government should have engaged the local population in a dialogue over the approach. That way, there is an opportunity for education on the disease, as well as an explanation of what the curfew entails and how it works to combat the disease.¹³ Instead, Sierra Leone's approach fostered continued distrust from the general population as they did not see progress being made against the disease.

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Sierra Leone utilized curfews to try to control the spread of Ebola in 2014 and 2015. Sierra Leone's approach proves that a significant workforce is required to complete the necessary tasks during a curfew within a reasonable time. Lack of response or effectiveness has a direct impact on the community's trust of the government and healthcare system. To improve curfews or lockdowns, it is important to include the people in the community during the process and implementation to overcome obstacles for treatment.

¹³ Meghan Werft, "From Curfew to Vaccine--Why Sierra Leone Still Isn't Ebola Free," Global Citizen, July 23, 2015, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/from-curfew-to-vaccine-why-sierra-leone-still-isnt/>.