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# President Sirleaf: Special Message on the Ebola Response

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"The announcement yesterday by the United States Government of direct military assistance is a significant moment in the battle against Ebola. Our two countries maintain a historic friendship. Liberia looks forward to working closely with the United States in finalizing these plans and deploying new resources to their maximum effect. We hope this decision by the United States will spur the rest of the international community into action. Our American partners realize Liberia cannot defeat Ebola alone. This disease is not simply a Liberian or West African problem. The entire community of nations has a stake in ending this crisis. The people of Liberia have suffered greatly since this disease took hold. But we are a strong and resilient people. As their President, I will not rest until we defeat Ebola. To Liberians my message is simple - we are fighting back."



## **Statement by Her Excellency, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, on the Update of the Ebola Crisis**

**September 17, 2014**

### **My fellow Liberians:**

Since March, we have faced a terrible tragedy in our country. Along with our sister Republics of Guinea and Sierra Leone, we continue to battle an unprecedented outbreak of the Ebola virus disease. The virus was first noticed in December 2013 in a small village in Guinea. It was not confirmed as Ebola for three and a half months as no one – not even the world's experts - knew that this was Ebola. By the time it was confirmed the virus had already spread and was in Sierra Leone and on its way to Liberia. We now know that Ebola can only be transmitted from person to person. So all that is needed is to stop person-to-person transmission: put the person in isolation, and ensure that the people caring for them are wearing protective equipment. If that had happened last December, there would have been not a single further case. The difficulty of course is that did not happen. Ebola is rare and it was very easy to confuse it with other diseases we have in this region, such as cholera or Lassa fever.





Our cultural and our family practices did not help when we finally woke up

to the disease so we have to keep telling each other about what to do.

When a patient is sick with Ebola it is crucial that they are isolated from others and given appropriate care. But we know that for families to see their loved ones being taken where they are not able to follow and be with them is strange and frightening. We also know that to have a case of Ebola in a family can lead to stigma and shame. And so some families hid their sick relatives. They did not take them to the health facility. They did not look for vital medical assistance. They continued to care for their relatives at home, in secret. By doing this, the virus continued to spread -through Lofa, the country's bread basket, to Nimba, to Monrovia where we face the largest urban outbreak of one of the deadliest of diseases known to man.

The disease has now spread to 10 counties, with Lofa and Montserrado the hardest hit. It has not spared anyone – we have lost mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. In some instances it has taken multiple members of families.

To date, the number of those affected by the disease has been disheartening: There have been a total of 2535 cumulative cases which includes confirmed, probable and suspected cases. Of these, total of 1328 have died. A total of 172 cumulative health care workers have been affected and 82 have died. We are responding to over 100 children orphaned by the disaster.

With limited resources and capacity, the government responded swiftly and decisively to the outbreak. We declared a health emergency and empowered the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare to lead the response, working with WHO, MSF and other partners. In consultation with the National Legislature, we declared a State of Emergency. We quarantined and contained areas of the country, limited non-essential movements in parts of the country, instituted a curfew, suspended non-essential government work and closed schools. We acted within the scale of our capacity to contain the scale of an outbreak we could not imagine possible.

We worked in strategic partnership with governments and organizations that have specific expertise in controlling epidemics. We followed the roadmap introduced by the World Health Organization which has now been incorporated in our national Ebola Response Strategy.

The World Health Organization has declared the outbreak an international public health emergency. In the next few days, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will release projections about trajectory of the outbreak based on current trends and data. We have to be realistic about the scope and size of the problem and accept the scientific projections. However, we are hopeful that we do not have to meet those projections. Those numbers reflect will the worst case scenarios, the result of what could happen if we do not take the actions that are required to break the transmission.

But in the midst of these difficult numbers, there is hope – because a total of because a total of 300 plus patients have recovered free from the virus and gone home. Yes, there is hope – hope that it is within our individual and collective abilities to protect ourselves while caring for those we love. I know that we can prevent more deaths by caring for those who are sick properly, as well as preventing ourselves from contracting the disease and infecting the people we love and care about.

I want you, the Liberian people, to know that your Government will to do all that is within our power to ensure that the scenario in the projections do not come to pass. It is in recognition of the scale of this disease that we have enlisted the help of our bilateral and multilateral partners. We will continue to take clear actions and introduce the measures required to break the transmission chain and reverse the spread of the virus.

And you, our citizens must do your part. Each one has to be responsible for all because the actions of one affect the health of all. We will continue to ask for international help, but until we take responsibility of this problem as individuals, as families, as neighborhoods, as communities, as districts, as counties and as a nation, this

problem will not go away. Especially in this regard, the next few months will be crucial in this fight. On behalf of the Liberian people and in my own name, I want thank President Obama and the American people for scaling up the American response. I have also spoken to several members of the US congress who are giving President Obama the support that he needs. We remain in touch with the leaders of other governments to take similar steps and join us in partnership to end this disease.

As we reach out to partners, we have stressed the need to restore basic and secondary health care, to respond to the many who are sick with thyphoid, malaria and other diseases that need to be treated. We have pointed out the gains in reduction in HIV AIDS, malaria and child mortality that need to be maintained and enhanced. But we have also stressed the need to strengthen our health care system in the long term.

I want to thank the countless Liberians who have been working night and day to try to fight this disease: the nurses and doctors who could have fled, but have made the brave decision to stay and treat the sick; our sons who are doing the physically and emotionally draining work of collecting bodies. Our nation, our people, are forever grateful to all of you and we expect to announced early next week that this gratitude goes beyond words. To our security forces who provide the protection as others serve – to the AFL who will return to the barracks at end of the month, and will work with the US military in engineering work; and the LNP and BIN who will continue to carry on with the responsibility to protect, we say thank you.

I would also like to thank our regional institutions and the many people who have come from aboard to help us. Our brothers and sisters from around the world who have come here to help, who have exhibited the highest level of service to humanity, indeed some of whom have died doing so. They deserve our collective thanks from the bottom of our hearts.

But defeating Ebola is just the start. We also need to ensure that Ebola does not destroy our livelihood. As we attempt to protect lives, we must similarly protect livelihood.

We were just starting to work our way out of poverty at the time Ebola struck. The IMF had us on track to meet the target under our Agenda for Transformation; we were making good progress on building the critical infrastructure needed to alleviate the poverty of our people; we were poised to turn investment into operations so as to create the jobs we need; we had made significant progress to reform our education system and improve our health system.

We had grown up to 11 airlines flying into RIA weekly. The number of people flying in and out of the country was steadily rising. We were building roads, expanding access to electricity, reducing infant and maternal mortality. We have to return to those tasks. Even as we work to defeat this unseen enemy, we must do so with our eyes toward the future.

In this respect, our partners in financial institutions have not let us down - the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the European Commission which supports our Ebola response will also be with us in our war to restore economic and social services.

We need to get our schools reopened. We need to re-establish normal healthcare. We need to get our food belt planting so we don't miss a whole season; indeed we need to be producing more so that we grow out of poverty. We need airlines to return so people can come and leave.

We need to find ways of caring for the orphans who so tragically now exist in greater numbers. And we need to press the play button since everything is on pause at the moment. We need to get back to the work of building roads, power plants, and attracting more investment to create jobs. We need to get on with the business to stimulate and strengthen the growing private sector, with emphasis on promoting Liberian entrepreneurship. There is only one choice for us. To pull out of this, we must fight back. Our cherished legacy of resilience - of making it when no one give us a chance - can never be defeated. In the heat of our civil and political crisis, people wrote Liberia off. WE were seen as a pariah. We went through some of the darkest hours that any people, any nation can endure. But with our fighting spirit, we survived. We more than survived. We thrived. I believe in that spirit of resilience. I believe in the Liberian people. I believe that we are stronger than the greatest threat with which we are currently faced. And I believe we will prevail. The war did not defeat us, a completely destroyed economy – the greatest collapse since World War II - did not defeat us. Ebola will not defeat us – never. We have faced great tragedies before. These have tested us and shown our true character. I

call on you to stand up again. We are fighting back and we will win.

And so my people, as we tackle this disease, I want you to know that your government will spare no effort. We will do everything that can be done. We will seek every solution that can be sought. No effort will be spared in defeating our common enemy so that we can return to the business of building our country – building a future for our children and our children's children.

May God bless our great nation. May we stand together as I know we can. And may God continue to bless us. Now let us go and win this fight.

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