

Beat: Health

Ebola spread slowing in Liberia as WHO lowers death toll

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USPA News - The spread of the deadly Ebola virus continues to slow down in Liberia, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported on Wednesday, although it added that the number of cases in neighboring Sierra Leone continues to rise. The situation in Guinea remains unchanged.

In an updated situation report released on Wednesday, the international public health agency revised the death toll from all eight affected countries down to 4,818, compared to 4,951 deaths reported in Friday's update. The revision is the result of more than 440 suspected cases in Sierra Leone being discarded over the past week while Liberia reported at least 284 new deaths. "At the country level, the weekly incidence appears to be stable in Guinea. In Sierra Leone the weekly incidence continues to rise, while in Liberia it appears to be declining," WHO said in Wednesday's update. "In all three countries, Ebola transmission remains persistent and widespread." But despite the seemingly positive signs from Liberia, WHO continues to believe that the figures are too low because of under-reporting. Authorities in Liberia did not report any confirmed Ebola cases in the past week, but at least 89 probable cases were reported, most of which were from the Montserrado area that includes the capital Monrovia. Probable cases were also reported in the Margibi district and five other districts, but Lofa district did not report any new cases. "In further evidence that the incidence is flattening in some districts, Lofa did not report a single case in the past week. The district has shown a gradual decline in incidence in the past six weeks," WHO said. "More data, including an analysis of laboratory data, are needed to examine more thoroughly the situation in Liberia." In neighboring Sierra Leone, authorities reported 435 newly-confirmed Ebola cases over the past week, with the capital Freetown remaining one of the worst affected cities. "The western districts of Bombali and Port Loko and the western rural area of the country remain key drivers of the rise in incidence in the country," WHO said. At least 93 confirmed Ebola cases were reported in Guinea over the past week, with signs that the spread may be slowing down in some areas. UN envoy Anthony Banbury, who coordinates the global response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, said on Tuesday that 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." Overall, at least 13,042 people have been infected with Ebola since the outbreak began, including 4,818 people who have died of the disease, according to health authorities in the eight countries involved. Liberia has been the worst hit country with at least 6,525 cases including 2,697 deaths, but authorities believe the actual figures are far higher. 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 and Nigeria. 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. 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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