

SIERRA LEONE'S NEXT CHALLENGE: REBUILDING THE ECONOMY

President Ernest Bai Koroma of Sierra Leone alongside his counterparts from Liberia and Guinea visited Washington to pledge for help from the international community. The presidents called for a cancellation of their countries' debt to aid economic recovery. As the number of Ebola cases drops, the focus is turning to helping rebuild broken healthcare systems and restarting business.

Sierra Leonean President Ernest Bai Koroma has been on a 6-day visit to Washington. Koroma told *The Washington Post* that he was seeking assurances that the world will help Sierra Leone and the other nations regain their economic footing from the devastating blow delivered by Ebola virus.

He and other leaders from the worst Ebola-stricken nations met with President Obama on Wednesday (April 15th). Mr. Obama said the global response must continue, even as the number of new Ebola cases has dropped to zero in Liberia and about 30 in Guinea and Sierra Leone.

"We have to be vigilant, and the international community has to remain fully engaged in a partnership with these three countries until there are no cases of Ebola," Mr. Obama said. "Health systems also have to be rebuilt to meet daily needs — vaccines for measles, delivering babies safely, treating H.I.V./AIDS and malaria." (Source: *New York Times*.)



Figure 1. WASHINGTON, DC - APRIL 15: U.S. President Barack Obama delivers a statement to the news media before meeting with Sierra Leonean President Ernest Bai Koroma, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Guinean President Alpha Conde (not pictured). Source: Getty Images (Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

MARSHALL PLAN FOR THE COUNTRIES STRUCK BY EBOLA?

Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea are asking international donors to cancel their debts and give them 5-6 billion US dollars over two years to rebuild their economies, Sierra Leone's president said on Thursday (April 16th).

"Our social services are ruined, our economies have halted, and we need a real Marshall Plan to take us out of the woods," President Ernest Bai Koroma said in an interview with the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"If that (debt) is canceled and support is provided to our regional program, it will take us a long way forward in our transformation agenda," Koroma said.

On Friday April 17th, the leaders of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia met with the heads of the World Bank, the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund. “Is this asking too much?” asked Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as she called for debt forgiveness during the high-level roundtable meeting.

“We say no,” Sirleaf said. “Because a strong Mano River Union [Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea] can be a formidable force for recovery and resilience in the sub-region.” As already mentioned, Sierra Leonean President Ernest Bai Koroma has also voiced support for debt cancellation.

There was no immediate reaction from the World Bank or International Monetary Fund. However, the African Development Bank’s President Donald Kaberuka acknowledged that some arrangements could be made. “We need to provide them this debt relief, it’s not a lot of money and we can afford it,” Kaberuka said during the Washington meeting.

FOCUS ON HEALTHCARE AND RESTARTING ECONOMY

Koroma told The Washington Post (April 15th) that he wanted to focus on four areas now. First, he wanted to reopen the nation’s schools, which had been shut since September. On Tuesday, 14th April the schools reopened and students returned (see below).

Second, Koroma wants to rebuild the nation’s health system. Fear of Ebola infection led patients and medical staff to avoid hospitals and clinics. The disease killed 11 doctors in a nation with only an estimated 134 doctors for 6 million residents. Koroma said he hopes to speed up the training of new doctors and nurses, but his country will still need help from foreign medical groups. “We are seeking funding from outside

from our bilateral friends,” Koroma said, explaining that this is one of the reasons he came to Washington.

Koroma also wants to support what he called “social protection programs” aimed at helping people who survived Ebola and the families of people who died from the disease.

However, the biggest task is getting business back. “We need to restart the economy,” Koroma said.

Before Ebola, Sierra Leone’s economy had been booming although the country was still one of the world’s poorest. The nation was predicted to be among the fastest-growing in the world in 2014. But that was before Ebola. Due to the EVD outbreak, many of the nation’s iron ore mines – a major employer and source of tax revenue -- shut down. Farmers became afraid to tend their fields. Efforts to curtail the outbreak led to interruptions in harvesting and planting. Small businesses suffered as even the most common transactions seemed infused with risk. This year, the economic output is forecast to contract 13 percent.

FOOD INSECURITY LOOMS

Food shortages are worsening since many farmers have been unable to tend their crops. The World Food Programme is providing supplies.

Koroma told The Washington Post on Thursday 15th April he was concerned about the planting season for rice, and said farmers urgently needed seedlings, equipment and fertilizer within the next few weeks. “This is very critical,” he said. “We have to move quickly and cut through the bureaucracy.”

The World Food Programme forecasts the number of food insecure people in Sierra Leone, meaning they cannot get enough to eat, will increase by one third to 610,000 this year.

SCHOOLS REOPEN

Children in Sierra Leone returned to school on Tuesday April 14th after staying home for nine months because of the Ebola outbreak. More than 8,000 schools were reopened across Sierra Leone, although attendance at many was poor amid some skepticism that the crisis was over.

Unicef helped train 9,000 teachers in Ebola prevention and safety, it said, and is supplying schools with cleaning equipment and 24,300 hand-washing stations.

The United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) says that the reopening of Sierra Leone's schools marks "a major step in the normalisation of life".

The government hopes that the studying time lost by the country's 1.8 million children can still be made up.



Figure 2. Students gathering to wait for reopening of their school on Tuesday April 14th. Source: BBC

EBOLA SITUATION "ENCOURAGING" IN SIERRA LEONE

- According to WHO, A total of 37 confirmed cases of Ebola virus disease (EVD) was reported in the week to 12 April, compared with 30 the previous week. Case incidence in Guinea increased to 28. Sierra Leone reported 9 confirmed cases, the same total as in the previous week. Liberia reported no confirmed cases.
- In Sierra Leone, cases were reported from 3 western districts: Kambia (4 cases), Port Loko (1 case), and Western Area Urban (4 cases), which includes the capital, Freetown.

- WHO reports that treatment capacity exceeds demand in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Accordingly, national authorities in both countries have begun to implement plans for the phased safe decommissioning of surplus facilities. Each country will retain a core capacity of high-quality Ebola treatment centres, strategically located to ensure complete geographic coverage, with additional rapid-response capacity held in reserve.
- Response indicators from Sierra Leone continue to be encouraging, WHO reports. The number of EVD-positive deaths that were identified in the community after post-mortem testing was 3 in the week to 12 April. The low proportion of laboratory samples that tested EVD-positive (9 of 1338: <1%) and the increasing proportion of cases that arise among registered contacts (67% for the most recent reporting period) strengthen confidence that the downward trend in case incidence over the past 5 weeks will continue.

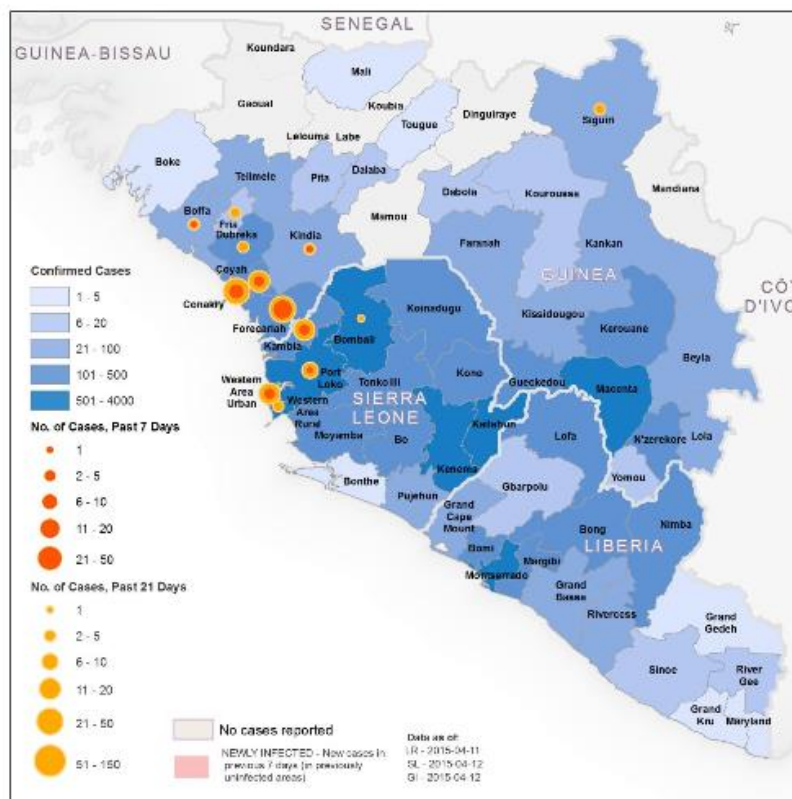


Figure 3. Geographical distribution of new and total confirmed cases. Source: WHO

SLOF takes the opportunity to offer relevant information concerning Ebola Outbreak in West Africa, especially in Sierra Leone. Our bulletin includes news in a nutshell concerning a particular topic about Ebola which may be relevant for Sierra Leoneans living in Finland and Finnish Citizens, Finnish partners, and NGOs. SLOF information sources are WHO, FAO, CNBC, FAO, MSF, AP, WFP, AFP, BBC, Aljazeera, France 24, and CNN, The Guardian and other media. SLOF is not responsible for any misinformation.