

Beat: Health

Liberia closes border, restricts movements to fight Ebola

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USPA News - Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf decided late Sunday to close most of the country's border crossings and to implement strict restrictions on movements in an effort to stop the ongoing Ebola outbreak in West Africa that has already claimed 681 lives. Sirleaf, in an address to the nation after a task force meeting, described the outbreak as a national emergency.

"As we have also begun to see, it attacks our way of life, with serious economic and social consequences," she said. "As such, we are compelled to bring the totality of our national resolve to fight this scourge." The leader spoke at the conclusion of the first meeting of a newly-established national task force, which was announced over the weekend. The meeting came on the heels of news that one of Liberia's most high-profile doctors, Dr. Samuel Brisbane, died after previously testing positive for the deadly virus. Two American aid workers have also become infected. As part of the new measures, Liberia has closed all its borders with the exception of major entry points such as Roberts International Airport, James Spriggs Payne Airport, Foya Crossing, Bo Waterside Crossing, and Ganta Crossing. At these entry points, preventive and testing centers will be established in an effort to stop Ebola-infected people from entering the country. "Stringent preventive measures to be announced will be scrupulously adhered to," the president said, referring to measures at entry points which remain open. "A new travel policy by the Liberia Airport Authority covering inspection and testing of all outgoing and incoming passengers will be strictly observed." The new measures also include restrictions on public gatherings such as solidarity marches, demonstrations, and promotional events. All government-run facilities and public places have been ordered to install and provide public access for washing of hands and other sanitization services, while hotels, restaurants, entertainment centers and cinemas are required to play 5-minute films on Ebola awareness and prevention. In addition, communities that are seriously affected by Ebola will be fully quarantined and travel in and out of these areas will be restricted. The president said support will be provided to those directly affected by quarantine restrictions, and said citizens outreach teams are being established. "Government vehicles will be commandeered as appropriate, to provide needed logistics support to the health delivery system," Sirleaf explained. "Standing orders have been given to the security forces, including the Armed Forces of Liberia, to give support to the technical team and the Task Force in enforcing these regulations." Sirleaf, who has led the nation since January 2006 and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, appealed to the public to "cooperate by refraining from harming or rejecting health workers and citizens' representatives who are only trying to save lives and protect citizens." She said the next meeting of the task force is scheduled to take place on Tuesday afternoon. At least 681 people are believed to have died of Ebola in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, according to the most recent figures released by authorities. The death toll includes a 40-year-old Liberian man who flew to the Nigerian city of Lagos on July 20, after which he was admitted to hospital and died. He later tested positive for Ebola, making it Nigeria's first case. The current outbreak features the Zaire strain of the Ebola virus, which is considered the most aggressive and deadly strain, killing more than 9 out of 10 affected on average. With now 1,241 suspected and confirmed cases in the region, including 681 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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