



# **Liberia Rights and Development Advocacy Network (LiRDAN)**

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## **LiRDAN Questions Government's Response to the Ebola Epidemic**

### **- Seeks Explanation for Premature Lifting of West Point Quarantine**

**Monrovia, Monday, September 1, 2014:** The Liberia Rights and Development Advocacy Network (LiRDAN), a consortium of rights advocacy organizations in the country has described Government of Liberia's response to the Ebola epidemic as erratic, haphazard, ineffectual and marred in high-level propaganda and misinformation given the unprecedented levels of infection as well as unending death tolls in the country compared to our MRU neighbors also affected by the outbreak including Sierra Leone and Guinea, where the epidemic was first reported.

In a press statement, the rights advocacy group lamented the lukewarm response of the Liberian Government towards the early signs of the outbreak when it was first reported along the border with Guinea early this year and observed that the second wave of the outbreak which has now taken an epidemic level in the country did not have to happen had the Government responded in a more professional and timely fashion. Up to date and amidst of huge international support, the government through the National Task Force is still grappling with the issues of testing centers, the creation of isolations centers and a health response process that is paralyzed and ineffective due to inadequate ambulances and the closure of several health centers.

LiRDAN believes these shortfalls and many others highlight government's inability to mitigate and manage the fight against the Ebola virus in the country. With a death toll of about 700 in Liberia, the group observed that recent measures pronounced by the Government in the form of the setting up of a National Task Force on Ebola, State of Emergency, night curfew and border closures are rather too late and lack the necessary safeguards for preventing human rights violations including excesses by security officers.

The process leading to the imposition and lifting of quarantine of 'suspected' communities such as the case of the Township of West Point remains highly questionable as it lacks clear information. The initial concept of setting up a holding center by the Liberian Government in the community which resulted into protest and looting is a clear indication of how haphazardly the government is managing the crisis. West Point now stands as an epic case for all to review; the premature lifting of the quarantine order and the lack of further sensitization on the 'WHY', has set the stage for all West Pointers to be less cautious and think that the Ebola virus does not exist in the Township.

The group recalled that the first few cases of Ebola were reported in the country as early as March 2014. On Monday, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the Chief Medical Officer of Liberia, Dr. Bernice Dahn in an official Health Ministry statement disclosed that “six cases of Ebola had been reported in Lofa County and that the disease was spreading along the border with Liberia, specifically in the communities and towns close to Guinea towns of Guekedou, Nzerekore, Kissidougou and Macenta.” The statement of Dr. Dahn at the time undermined any official action of the Liberian Government to stop, prevent, and protect its citizens from what we are now facing.

On Thursday of the same week, March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Information Minister Lewis Brown speaking at the Ministry of Information weekly press briefing told reporters that that Ebola did not exist at all in Liberia as the cases in Foya and Zorzor Districts, Lofa County, had only been Guineans who crossed the border to seek help in Liberian health facilities. Also, a member of the National Legislature, Senator Cletus Wotorson said that the Ebola noise made by Health authorities was much ado about and intended to extort money from donors. At the moment, these high profile Liberian leaders are now denying ever telling the Liberian people of the absence of the Ebola virus after the damage has been done.

LIRDAN wonders why in the face of the startling revelation made by the Chief Medical Officer about the spread of the virus along the Liberian-Guinean border and in consideration of the homogeneity of the communities along the border with same families moving back and forth on both sides, as well as the highly contagious nature of the Ebola Virus, Government’s official stance as propagated by Government’s chief spokesperson, Information Minister Lewis Brown, preferred to downplay the situation and treat it as though the reported cases were isolated. Senator Wotorson’s assertion on the other hand incited an element of mistrust and suspicion in the fight against the virus and any action of preventive measure by Liberians.

LIRDAN further questions how can the government cite “citizens’ denial” as the main reason for the spread of the disease in the country when it set the stage for mistrust and confusion amongst the citizenry by the utterances of its officials?

Meanwhile, in the wake of the circumstances surrounding the West Point situation, LiRDAN calls on government to provide explanation for the premature lifting of the West Point Quarantine 11 days short of the planned 21 days of quarantine. The group also wants government to rather appoint an independent board of inquiry instead of the Ministry of Defense to probe the West Point shooting incident which left one person dead and another seriously injured, since in fact Defense Minister Brownie Samuka has already prejudiced the case by asserting that the Military did not shoot at demonstrators.