UPDATE ON COVID-19 SPREAD IN SIERRA LEONE

Tomorrow, 5th April 2020, Sierra Leone starts a 3-day Lockdown from Sunday 5th April at 6am to Tuesday 7th April 2020 at midnight.

As at today, Sierra Leone Covid-19 confirmed case has risen to 4 with more than 150 primary and secondary contacts and more than 100 persons in quarantine for observation.

The spread of the virus has taken a different dimension as the people of Sierra Leone who had experienced the Ebola Epidemic never wanted to have another experience of a viral disease that has a lot of misinformation about its mode of transmission and fatality amongst black Africans. Irrespective of the confusion that prevails in the people’s mind, the Government of Sierra Leone and the Ministry of Health and Sanitation has not taken the preparedness lightly. The government has established a Covid-19 governance committee which oversees all the activities towards the covid-19 eradication. The President of the republic has also declared a 12 months State of Public Health Emergency since last week and the Parliament of Sierra Leone has endorsed it waiting to establish the measures within two weeks and to be reviewed every 90 days. All learning Institutions have been closed until further notice. All religious gatherings have been banned, entertainment centres banned, tourism activities banned, land and sea borders closed to human traffic only goods are allowed. The Corvid-19 committee has identified two centres in the country, one in the western area, 34 military hospital and the second in the eastern region, Kenema to Isolate and for case management.

The government of Sierra Leone at the moment has taken this approach: reactivate the Ebola containment pillars of which the Surveillance Unit has been strengthened, Quarantining incoming persons for 14 days and primary and secondary contacts, testing of persons quarantined at the beginning and at the end of their quarantine period, contact tracing of contacts, training of health workers on Corvid-19 epidemiology, isolation techniques and case management. Lastly, the government has prioritised sensitisation at national, subnational and community levels within the country. Above all, the government has emphasised on hand washing practices and physical social distancing practices. The 3-day lock down was declared to enhance efficient contact tracing of the contacts of the Corvid-19 index case and the second confirmed case. The last two confirmed cases were already in quarantined when diagnosed.

Regarding the level of preparedness with regards to logistics, there is a huge challenge with Personal Protective Equipment(PPE) like gowns, surgical masks; Other equipment like Oxygen supply facilities is a huge dilemma and ventilators is nothing to talk about. However, the government is trying to get the essentials in place but how soon, only God
knows. Test kits are available to a level that about 4000 people could be tested as there are about 20,000 PCR test kits available in the country.

There are 42 hospitals in the country of which 23 are for private and faith-based Organisations. Of these hospitals, only two have been prepared to receive suspects Corvid-19 patients and each contains about 30 beds with one ventilator.

The St. John of God Catholic Hospital is not at the level of receiving any Corvid-19 confirmed case for management as the preparedness is below the expected standard. There is no ventilator in the hospital, for Oxygen production, we use only concentrators, and this is available in paediatric ward and we have only 5 good working concentrators. There is an Isolation Unit but only to keep the suspect until the sample is collected, and results published. It takes about 6-8 hours for a test result to be known. The Hospital has no testing possibility as this is controlled by the two facilities. The triaging structure of the hospital needs renewal in order to limit the closeness of any Corvid-19 suspect into the hospital. Because if this happens, the hospital will be quarantined and deprived the other patients with other non-Corvid-19 conditions not to be treated. The staff needs intensive training on case management and triaging. In fact, the hospital will not be able to compensate the staff for this service as no patient will be asked to pay and the government will not compensate our staff for this great service done.

Among the primary contacts of the second confirmed Corvid-19 case, one of our young Brothers, who is a medical student in the clinical year attended lectures delivered by the patient who is the second confirmed case. Currently, he has been quarantined for 14 days by the Ministry of Health and Sanitation. We keep him in our prayers.

At the moment, the hospital is open 24 hours and we provide general and surgical services especially to pregnant women and Children. There are few adults visiting the hospital now, one main reason is lack of money and fear of contracting the virus whilst in the hospital. The hospital has embarked on community sensitisation and we hope to continue this activity in the days ahead, construct a temporal triage structure at the entrance of the hospital gate, train our staff on Personal safety through practice of Infection, Prevention and Control measures, and also ensuring the safety of the patients who visit the hospital. The hospital continues to lobby with friends and partners for support with fuel, drugs, and logistics like PPEs. The hospital is still providing maternal health promotion activities especially the women empowerment training and promotion. One major challenge for the hospital is to be able to generate revenue to pay the staff salaries for April 2020. We hope that generous persons will endeavour to assist this rural hospital otherwise, it will cease to provide needed services at this crucial time to the population as there is no bailing out by the government of Sierra Leone to faith-based Institutions.

I will continue to provide you updates as we progress with the disease containment.
We remember our friends in Europe and pray that this calamity will soon stop, and your lives will be safe. We remember your loved ones who have passed away as a result of this calamity. May God receive them in heaven.

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