



## **IFRC | West African governments must integrate trained Ebola responders into community-based health systems**

**7 November 2015**

Freetown, 7 November 2015 – With the WHO declaration that the Ebola virus disease outbreak in Sierra Leone has now ended, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is calling upon all West African countries affected by the epidemic to integrate trained responders into their community-based health systems.

“Ebola-affected countries face many challenges in strengthening their healthcare systems,” said Alasan Senghore, IFRC director, Africa region. “Trained Red Cross volunteers have transferrable skills which can be used in future disease outbreaks. We call on the governments of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone to integrate these workers into community health systems as they begin to recover.”

Through its Community Events-Based Surveillance programme, the Red Cross in Sierra Leone has trained over 2,000 community-based volunteers to act as an early-warning system for Ebola and other epidemics. This engagement and surveillance at the community level, which will continue beyond the end of the epidemic, will strengthen the country’s response capacity and mitigate the human and economic impact of future outbreaks.

Since the start of the outbreak 20 months ago, more than 10,000 Red Cross volunteers have played a critical role in getting to zero cases, conducting safe and dignified burials, contact tracing, psychosocial support, surveillance and social mobilization, as well as operating two treatment centres.

“Our volunteers are among the many heroes of this operation,” said Senghore. “They were accused of spreading the virus and causing deaths. Some were verbally and physically threatened. Many were banned from their own communities. Yet, they never wavered in their commitment to rid their countries of this hideous virus.”

As the outbreak in Sierra Leone ends, the IFRC recognizes its responsibility to ensure that those who helped fight the virus are well supported as they reintegrate back into their communities.

“We have a duty to ensure that our frontline volunteers, who risked their lives to rid Sierra Leone of Ebola, do not suffer long term effects as a result of their heroic actions,” said Senghore. “Many responders continue to face stigmatization because of the invaluable role they played in ending the Ebola outbreak. We cannot abandon them now, and call on our partners to help us, help them.”

One project has already been established to facilitate the reintegration of 800 Red Cross Ebola workers in Sierra Leone. The joint 1.8 million Swiss franc project with UNDP aims to reskill frontline Ebola responders through scholarships, business empowerment grants, vocational training and career mentoring. Ongoing psychosocial support will continue to be provided, to help responders cope with any stigma they may face.

“It may be challenging for them to find a new job or return to school. This joint project with our partners at UNDP will help make that transition as smooth as possible,” added Senghore.

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A similar project with UNDP is also planned when the Ebola outbreak ends in Guinea, which continues to report fewer than ten confirmed cases a month.

In Liberia, Red Cross volunteers received a negotiated package to assist them as they integrated into new employment, when the outbreak was declared over in September.

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