

Ishmeal Alfred Charles
Testimony September 16, 2014

Good afternoon, my name is Ishmeal Alfred Charles, a resident of Freetown, Sierra Leone, married and a father of two children, 9 months and 10 years. I arrived yesterday morning to share with you what my country is dealing with on a daily basis with the current Ebola outbreak, while still rebuilding after a brutal civil war; unlike the civil war the outbreak creates more fear to the entire population

Today there is a general atmosphere of fear. This is the biggest crisis we have faced since the end of our civil war.

As a former Child soldier, I was able to survive the war, and now I fear, “This is going to be worse than the war.”

The Healey International Relief Foundation is based in Lumberton, NJ supports the rebuilding of Sierra Leone’s healthcare system and has provided relief services to our country since the end of our civil war, over 12 years ago.

The Foundation Mission is to invest and support families and individuals affected by war, disaster and adverse socio-economic conditions through the delivery of healthcare, clean water, food, training and other programs, hence its mandate is to empower communities and build their capacity to become self-sustaining.

The foundation partners with Caritas Freetown on all its projects in Sierra Leone.

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Caritas Freetown whose mission is to eradicate poverty, corruption, injustice; to improve equality, advance good governance, achieve peace and human rights, empower women, youth and the disabled.

As the spokesperson for the Healey International Relief Foundation in Sierra Leone, I feel privileged to share with you our experience. Since the outbreak, we have implemented the “Ebola Outbreak Response Project” in the rural and urban districts of Sierra Leone. We work closely with the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, Ministry of Social Welfare and the Emergency Operation Center.

As part of this project, we have been working in number of communities within the Western Area Districts with a catchment area of about 219,000 people, raising awareness and providing chlorine, soaps and tap buckets to all police stations and posts. In addition we have a strong national media campaign in collaboration with our counterpart Caritas organizations in the other regions.

The growing number of cases recorded on a daily basis has made the situation in Sierra Leone very scary. Each day the situation becomes worse and the effects of the Ebola cannot be over emphasized. When I was about to leave, my 10 years old daughter asked “dad are you leaving us here in this difficult situation with this Ebola, they said there is no Ebola in America, why can’t you take us along?” I starred at her

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for a minute and said “Maa as I call her, my trip is for the general good of all our family and your future, I will be back in two weeks”, she asked again “are you sure when flights are being cut off daily?”

Similarly, my wife said, “dear the money you normally leave when travelling will not be enough as the cost of commodities has tripled”, this was another difficult situation.

As I leave, my biggest stress is if anyone gets sick while I am away, the health system is not functional.

The Ebola phobia is increasing. Even people who do not have Ebola are being stigmatized, not to talk about those who are tested positive.

The state is overwhelmed and unable to effectively coordinate the Ebola response and people are losing their confidence. The Ebola crisis has escalated quickly and has led to the widespread fallout the healthcare system.

- Harvests are being cancelled because so many farmers had died;
- In the capital, Freetown, patrons are sparse at hotels and restaurants specially those catering to the expatriates. Hotel occupancy rates have dropped and large hotels have only 4 guests and these hotels are laying off staff daily;

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- In a country with 70% illiteracy schools are closed indefinitely;
- Our country high orphan population, is increasing every day;
- People do not have the free will to bury their loved ones, and even the sick ones are deprived of the emotional care from their family needed to recover;
- Many companies are laying off staff amidst the slowdown in commerce, restrictions on travel and decrease in other economic activity.

As a result, households are struggling with food shortages and increase costs due to panic buying.

Families go hungry when the bread winner dies, gets sick or loses his or her jobs.

With the support of the United States, the International Community and the survival spirit of the people of Sierra Leone, I am confident we will defeat this deadly virus. However, a decade of progress will be lost, especially so when the health care was already in bad shape before the outbreak.

I plead not to leave once the crisis is over and help us rebuild our country physically and economically by investing in Sierra Leone to empower our people become self-reliant.

I thank you for your attention.