

Transcript of Press Conference with World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim and President of Sierra Leone Ernest Bai Koroma

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**World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim and President of Sierra Leone Ernest Bai Koroma
Press Conference
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Transcript

PRESIDENT KOROMA: Welcome, sir.

DR. KIM: Thank you very much for the very, very kind introduction.

First, I'm here mostly to observe and to congratulate the government of Sierra Leone and President Koroma for his leadership and Sierra Leone's leadership in their response to Ebola. President Koroma told me today that he has been walking the neighborhoods and going directly to the field to change the way people think about it and behave in the face of this epidemic.

Today in our meeting we talked about the importance of finishing the job on Ebola, on getting to zero cases and, at the same time, not waiting to finish, that you need to work on economic recovery. The World Bank Group together with partners, especially the United Kingdom, is committed to support Sierra Leone's authorities in their emergency response but as well, the longer-term economic recovery. We're accelerating our support to Sierra Leone, and we plan to deliver a comprehensive economic recovery package in just two years instead of three; in other words, our three-year plan we're going to frontload and disperse it in two years.

Our support will cover five areas.

First, we've already provided \$160 million to Sierra Leone for the Ebola crisis, and we will continue to support the objective of getting to zero cases as soon as possible. This is going to require many more resources, but we are absolutely committed to finding sufficient resources to get to zero. This is going to involve intensifying efforts in the west and the north of the country, particularly in Freetown and Port Loko, and empowering district level teams and subnational emergency operations centers in order to break the chains of transmission and identify all contacts of those infected.

As I said, we cannot wait to get to zero to work on economic recovery. So our second area of support will be agriculture. We're concerned that agricultural production has dropped significantly as a result of this Ebola epidemic. We'll help farmers recover from this crisis by building feeder roads that connect small farmers to markets. We must make sure that the Ebola epidemic is not followed by a food security crisis. We're also working on enhancing safety nets to protect the most vulnerable from the economic consequences of the epidemic.

Third, we'll help to improve basic infrastructure such as urban services and access to electricity that will help the well-being of citizens. We need to help Sierra Leoneans create jobs to help people recover from income losses as a result of the epidemic.

Fourth, in response to the shortage of finance for businesses, we'll continue to work through our private sector arm, the IFC, to provide liquidity to local banks. This will support especially small- and medium-size enterprises and local entrepreneurs and farmers.

Finally, the foundation of the Ebola response and the economic recovery is strong governance. So, we're helping the government to strengthen public financial management. We're working closely with the International Monetary Fund and the African Development Bank and preparing several tranches of direct budget support.

Again, I want to thank President Koroma for his leadership in fighting the Ebola epidemic. We think that the commitment that we need to make here today is that Sierra Leone must emerge from the Ebola epidemic much stronger than it was before the Ebola epidemic. We can build infrastructure. We can train people to be community health workers. There's much that we can do in responding to the epidemic that we think can enhance economic growth and recovery afterwards.

Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN: We'll now respond.

PRESIDENT KOROMA: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. President of the World Bank and your delegation, let me once more welcome you to Sierra Leone.

This visit has been very, very encouraging. We have had lengthy discussions with the president and his team, and he has given us assurance that the World Bank will stick with us, will fight with us until the end of the Ebola virus disease in this country.

But that is not the only assurance he has provided us today. He has also assured us that as a World Bank, they are not only here to help us put in place strategies that will lead us to zero virus but also they are here to strategize with us on how to put our economy back on track, and that he has provided a lot of offers to us, a lot of support that we [unclear 01:22] economy, restarting or continuing infrastructure programs that we have been working on, and also put in place a big program that will not only strengthen our health, infrastructure in the country but will also focus on training more of our health workers; that is critical in not only conquering Ebola but moving forward.

Let me once more thank him for coming because his presence here today will send a signal to the rest of the world that Sierra Leone is still open for visitors. We are still safe. We are here fighting Ebola. The focus is for us to isolate Ebola, not to isolate the rest of the country.

I must also thank you for the meeting of the World Bank roundtable that was organized in October of this year. From that roundtable we have had an increase in the international participation in our efforts against Ebola.

I must say that we now have a lot international presence. The UN is here. The [unclear]. The British are working very hard to support us. We are very close to the Chinese, Cubans, the EU, the Irish, the AU, Nigeria--all providing us with support.

While we do appreciate the [unclear] president. I must say that there is still a need for us to address the gaps that still exist in certain areas of our interventions. Now, as of today, we are at 406-bed capacity in our treatment centers. Our projection for the total requirement is

[unclear] thousand five hundred. We are today at 726-bed capacity in our holding centers. We require 2,000 bed capacity in our holding centers.

We have five operational labs. We get 60 to 100 samples a day. We need [unclear] labs or we increase the capacity of our labs to 100, 200 capacity a day. So we still have some gaps to fill in.

We still need to have more contact traces and surveillance of cases because of the shift and the spread of the disease within the country. But, with the assurances that you have provided us with the expertise that you have more or less seconded to us to put in place a new strategy, we are hopeful that in the next week or so we are going to engage--the National Ebola Response Center will engage with a team that is here to ensure that we put in place a strategy that will take us to zero new infection.

Let me, in concluding, thank you for this visit and the assurances and encouragement that you have provided for us, and also the new approach that you have given to this old fight of Ebola in this country. So, once more, thank you.

CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, your Excellency, for your remarks. I told you we are a lucky people. President Koroma knows exactly where he wants to take the nation, and his Excellency, the president of the World Bank, has the tools to take us there, for us to get to zero and start building our nation.

Now, it's question time. But the president of the World Bank is on a three-nation tour. He also has to go Guinea from [unclear]. So I am going to use my mandate as chairman and limit the questions to two pertinent--very pertinent--questions. And if I want to use it further, I will also say that we will have one question from the middle side of the spectrum and one from the women, unless they want to yield their position.

So, now, any questions?

CHAIRMAN: Yes, Mr. Fofana of the BBC.

QUESTION: My name is Umaru Fofana, and I work for the BBC. I've got a question for the World Bank president.

It's interesting, you mentioned the area of job creation. As president, you are faced with the country's biggest investor, African Minerals, at risk of [unclear 06:56]. Is that anything the

Bank, not [unclear] the IFC, which you more or less oversee, is there anything you can do to rescue the situation?

And if I could quickly put a question to the president, you spoke about 400 and 5 [unclear] beds, treatment beds, being available at present. What is your view about the British intervention in Sierra Leone, namely the construction of treatment centers; 700 were promised. Thank you.

PRESIDENT KOROMA: Mr. Fofana, thank you very much for those questions.

Well, I did say two questions--you've asked two. So decide which one you want answered. I think your first question was very, very pertinent.

And I'd like to direct that to the World Bank president.

DR. KIM: Unfortunately, I don't know that this is the case, but here is the way we look at it. You know, at this point in the epidemic, it's a very different place than we were in August or September. Frankly, in August and September, I did not know whether we could catch up with the virus. I did not know whether any kind of effort would slow down the virus. But what we're seeing is that even incomplete efforts, efforts that are just focused on safe burials and identifying patients, have had some role in slowing down the virus.

The key now, though, is to get to zero, to get to zero as quickly as possible, which will take a massive effort, but it will take a massive effort in which every single day--sometimes every single minute, every single hour--you're changing your strategy based on where the virus is going.

Now, the structure here of the response centers we think is very good. We think that there are good people who are very disciplined. And so combining this minute-by-minute strategy with a very disciplined approach could put together, we think, a plan to get to zero that would be credible and, we hope, gets us there very soon. Now, that's going to take a lot of work. It's going to take multiple strategies at the same time.

That really is the only way to get businesses to come back. Now, my hope is that even before Sierra Leone gets to zero, if we put together a really good strategy to get to zero, we start seeing results and we find that the resource is supported, there are a lot of good things that can happen. For example, you talk about employment. There is a role for Sierra Leoneans in participating in the response to Ebola. Now, they need to be trained. They

need to play specific roles. But we think that there is a role and that, therefore, you could employ Sierra Leoneans to help in the response.

So, in any individual case, I think it's very hard for us to convince people to come back when they have left without being able to tell them, "Hey look, they know what they're doing. They're on top of it. They've got a good plan to get to zero, and you can see the curve. It's happening." That's when I think the recovery, from the perspective of the external world, will start in earnest.

For now, we are doing everything we can. For example, like building roads for farmers. We're doing everything we can now to prepare for the time when Ebola is at zero and the rest of the economy starts to grow. But for right now, there are things that we can do, and we need to do as many of them as we can to help rekindle economic growth.

CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much. That was a very good answer. We all have to put our hands on deck after Ebola.

Second question. I prefer a Lady -- Asma James of Radio Democracy. I said two questions. He asked two questions.

QUESTION: All right. Good afternoon.

My first one is for the World Bank president. I followed you at the UN/Africa leaders summit in August where you were a panelist at the women's event chaired by Samantha Powers. And then in that event, you committed yourself to women's economic advancement. Now in Sierra Leone, women are mostly affected with this Ebola. So how would you translate that commitment to action? Thank you.

CHAIRMAN: It's very good. That question is specifically directed to the president of the World Bank.

DR. KIM: We're looking at the entire portfolio of our activities to see if we're doing enough in terms of promoting women's participation in the labor force.

Now, I do understand that the impact on women has been very severe here in Sierra Leone. But if you look across the world, the opportunity for women participating in the labor force and receive equal wages is a huge problem. So, in Sierra Leone, I know that we're

very involved in social protection programs and social protection programs that specifically focus on women. But I think, as a whole, we want to be sure that all of the programs that we're working on here, all of the lending that we're doing here [unclear 12:24] Sierra Leone and many of the grants, are going to provide equal opportunities for women, and we'll continue to monitor our progress to see whether or not what we are doing is affording equal opportunity to women.

You know, economies as rich as the Japanese economy, they are now struggling with the problem of increasing labor force participation of women. It's really an issue all over the world. We have an entire group of people--"we call it a cross-cutting solutions area"--it's looking throughout our portfolio, and our pledge is to ensure that, over time, everything we do has within it a focus on ensuring that gender equality is a part of everything we do. So, right now, it's a matter of saying we're going to go in and support energy, support projects and improving the health systems. And then we're going to step back and say: What impact did this have on women?

CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: The Sierra Leone economy by now is focusing. By this time [unclear]. Now, given what is happening in the Iron Ore markets, we would need very huge resources to come back. Now would you champion debt relief and would you lead us by having the World Bank wipe off our debts?

DR. KIM: So, debt relief, as you well know, is something that was negotiated under very difficult circumstances some years ago, and there's something called the "highly indebted poor country initiative." And I don't know exactly what the status of Sierra Leone is, but maybe Makhtar can say something about it. But let me just tell you this, that it is not now and it never has been something that the World Bank or the World Bank president can just simply decide on his own. And so the answer to your question is no, it's not something that I can simply wave my hand and do that.

Now, let me say, though, that we have already committed \$160 million, the vast majority of that in grants. We're looking to find even more grant money, if we can, to support the response to Ebola. Moreover, we want to see people, given that the huge tragedy that it is, we're trying to find ways to see it also as an opportunity; in other words, in the response to Ebola, can we build up necessary infrastructure, can we train people who don't have skills to become health workers, for example, and continue to work as health workers after the

Ebola epidemic. We know that the health system needed bolstering anyway, could this be an opportunity to do just that?

So, we had this conversation this morning with President Koroma. We've got to be creative, and we've got to think about how we can turn this response into something that will end up being a positive for Sierra Leone. But wiping out all the debt of Sierra Leone, I wish I had that power; I do not.