

## COVID-19 - Response from Liberia

### Background

Liberia suffered two major civil wars between 1989 and 2003 that killed well over 400,000 thousand people. Still fragile from the war, the country was hit eleven years later by the Ebola virus epidemic in 2014 which lasted till 2015. A poor country struggling to recover from the devastation of years before and engulfed in massive social and economic difficulties was the Liberia that COVID-19 entered to wreak further havoc.

The first case of COVID-19 in Liberia was confirmed on 16<sup>th</sup> March. The infected person was a government official returning from Switzerland. He admitted to having violated the screening protocols, which had been instituted earlier, when he arrived at the country's international airport. The second case was confirmed on 17 March and the infected person was a close contact of the first case. The third case, also involving a returning traveler, was confirmed on 20 March. Following this, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs declared a national health emergency on 22 March, 2020.

### Government measures to address the pandemic

- The Liberian President George Weah declared a nationwide state of emergency on 8 April, 2020, with mandatory lockdown in several regions, including the capital, Monrovia, to combat the spread of the coronavirus. The Liberian Senate has since approved an extension of the state of emergency throughout the country for 90 days in order to control the spread of the coronavirus.
- Among the immediate measures adopted, the President banned the entry into Liberia of persons from countries where there were more than 200 confirmed cases of COVID-19.
- The Government, in coordination with the United Nations (UN), Donor Partners, the Ministry of Health and the National Public Health Institute of Liberia (NPHIL) put in place the National Multi-sectoral Response Plan (NMRP) to COVID-19.
- The President also appointed Ms Mary Broh to act as National Coordinator of the Executive Committee on coronavirus (ECOC) response in Liberia. In this role, Ms. Broh is to oversee a unique set of national strategic objectives to defeat the coronavirus disease.
- The President again appointed Finda Bundoo as National Compliance Officer, responsible for overseeing the overall allocation and disbursement of logistics and resources for the COVID-19 response. In consultation with the National Response Coordinator, Ms. Bundoo is to ensure the timely delivery of supplies for the control of COVID-19 in the country and account for them .
- 200 contact tracers have been recruited, trained and deployed on an emergency basis with the assistance of the United Nations. They are responsible for identifying those who have been in contact with infected persons and, in case they have symptoms, testing them. The contact tracers are also responsible for educating the community about how to prevent infections.

### Other measures

- The country received debt service relief from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on 13 April to free funds for the country in its fight against the pandemic.
- The Public Service has been asked to grant leave with pay to non-essential employees;
- Religious institutions and schools were urged to make regular handwashing arrangements for the safety of all;
- Motorcycle taxi drivers were asked to take only 01 passenger at a time, and the taxi to take 02 passengers in the back to provide space for passengers to observe as much social distancing as possible.

The Government has announced free electricity and water supply, but it is not clear that citizens have benefited yet.

### **Roles and Contribution of Trade Unions in the Fight Against the Pandemic**

The Liberia Labour Congress (LLC) has been active in demanding some of the measures that have so far been implemented in the fight against the pandemic. It was the LLC's request for a COVID-19 Task Force in the country that led to the appointment of the former of Monrovia, Mary Broh, as the National Coordinator of the Committee cited above. It was also the advocacy of the LLC that led to the establishment of a Food Aid Distribution Committee chaired by the Honourable Wilson Tarpeh, Minister of Trade, assisted by the Minister of Agriculture with the support of the World Food Programme Secretariat.

The LLC participated actively in the deliberations of the National Tripartite Council that decided that there would be no layoffs of workers during this period.

The Council decided that non-essential public or private sector workers could be sent home for the first 90 days with 50% of their salary while those who qualified as essential workers will remain in employment with 100% of their salary.

The LLC also advocated that those in the informal economy whose work had been severely hampered by the curfew measure should be provided with support to prevent them from falling into destitution.

The Union has also been involved in operations to raise awareness for compliance with various preventive measures announced by the Ministry of Health, in the distribution of food aid and other implementation actions of the COVID 19 response plan.

### **Conclusion**

As of May 22, 2020, the number of confirmed cases in Liberia stands at 249 cases with 136 recoveries and 24 deaths. This shows a steady rise in the spread of the disease. As in other African countries it is clear that the virus is still spreading and has not reached its peak of infection. While Africa and the rest of the world struggle to find a cure for the new coronavirus unions must continue to do their bit to contain the virus and prevent its spread and also to ensure that people are able to earn their livelihoods.

For unions, this requires serious focus on what is important for workers. In the first place, the issue of safety and health at work becomes of critical importance. This is to make sure that the world of work continues to be where workers earn a living and not where we contract the deadly virus. As the pressures of economy and survival lead to the easing of restrictions and the resumption of work, the union must be a champion in ensuring that protective clothing and equipment are available and that work is organised in ways that allow the necessary physical distancing required to prevent easy transmission of the virus.

Again, in Liberia as in many parts of Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the weakness of our economic and social fabric, particularly the weakness and near absence of social protection for the majority of our people. Our unions need to become more determined in advocating and campaigning for social protection, for quality public services and for employment. This we can do only if we pay the necessary attention to uniting workers and representing them faithfully. That way we can push our governments to do what they are elected for, namely, enacting policies and laws that serve the needs of development and bring material benefits to the people.