



A letter from Sierra Leone, from Rocco Falconer who leads Planting Promise: our charity and partner school. In response to my question 'So what's it like on the ground?'

*Well, it's pretty grim.*

*Ebola got to Sierra Leone in around March. Rather, that's when it was confirmed in Sierra Leone, it was probably in the country long before then. There is a huge gulf between the number of cases that are confirmed by the labs, and the number of cases that are actually out there. Very few of the cases will make it past family homes, and even fewer will end up in hospitals. At the moment there is a demand for about 700 beds to treat the Ebola victims. Sierra Leone has about 300 beds. The British Army are putting in another 700 bed hospital. But by the time it is ready, in December, we will need 1000 beds... and so it goes on.*

*Although there was a chance to contain the disease in April and May, that chance was, sadly, not taken. This is not just the government's fault. The problem is that this is no single person's fault, and there are so many features that have made the disease get so bad: the lack of a government response; the inability of the health service to do what is asked of it because there are not enough doctors, nurses, and hospital beds; the inability of the army or police to effectively enforce quarantine areas; the slowness of the response of the international community.*

*But at the same time there was a massive problem in simply getting Sierra Leoneans to accept that the disease was real, posed a threat, and could get as bad as it has. Initially there was huge scepticism. People refused to believe Ebola was anything more than a scam, some people thinking it a scam to get money from aid flows, some people thinking it a more sinister scam to kill people for their body parts.*

*So the challenge has been to get the government to accept the threat, and respond accordingly, and to get the people to accept the threat, and respond accordingly. Finally we are now seeing some signs of this. But now, months in, the opportunity to effectively contain the disease has passed and it has really taken a hold.*

*Taking a hold has meant such horrible tragedy unfolding. Everything has shut down. The already weak services have been completely decimated. In the main hospital in Kenema, which was the first epicentre of the outbreak but is now, sadly, just one of many epicentres, there were 18 nurses at the beginning of the outbreak. Now, there is one left. 14 have died of Ebola, and the remainder have fled. And who could blame them? The appointed chair of the Ebola response team, a doctor, died of Ebola. His successor, and his successor after that, also died of Ebola: the numbers are terrifying, and working in the health sector at the moment is like a death sentence.*

*There is now a horrible and terrible hopelessness amongst our friends and colleagues in Sierra Leone. The risks are obvious: Ebola is strengthening its hold over the country and needs serious measures to counter it. We are hopeful that the vaccine will help. Schools and all businesses are shut down whilst everybody waits for the worst to pass, and the light at the end of the tunnel to emerge.*

*We need food, water, materials. WE also need things to do! We are not allowed to re-start our school term, or our factory, or our businesses. But we will not stop paying our staff. All around us people are pulling out, and the dreadful effects of this horrible outbreak get made worse and worse.*

*Last week, the second biggest company in Sierra Leone - London Mining - went into administration. The last thing Sierra Leone needs is to lose the few valuable employers and sources of revenue for the country.*

*So: it's tough and difficult. We need all the help we can get. WE need to get back on our feet after the outbreak, and we need to survive until then.*

*Rocco*

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