

Liberia closes schools to curb Ebola

Dakar, Thursday

LIBERIA will close schools and consider quarantining some communities, it has said when announcing the toughest measures yet imposed by a West African government to halt the worst Ebola outbreak on record.

Security forces in Liberia were ordered to enforce the steps, part of an action plan that includes placing all non-essential government workers on 30-day compulsory leave.

Ebola has been blamed for 672 deaths in Liberia, neighboring Guinea and Sierra Leone, according to World Health Organisation figures, as under-funded healthcare systems have struggled to cope with the epidemic. Liberia accounted for just under

one-fifth of those deaths.

"This is a major public health emergency. It's fierce, deadly and many of our countrymen are dying and we need to act to stop the spread," Lewis Brown, Liberia's information minister, told Reuters.

"We need the support of the international community now more than ever. We desperately need all the help we can get."

But highlighting international concern about the crisis, the U.S. Peace Corps said it was withdrawing 340 volunteers from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf said in a speech posted on the presidency's website that the government was considering quarantining several communities based on the

recommendation of the health ministry.

An earlier draft of the measures sent to Reuters specified communities to be quarantined.

"When these measures are instituted, only health care workers will be permitted to move in and out of those areas. Food and other medical support will be provided to those communities and affected individuals," she said.

All markets in border areas are to be closed, she added.

Referring to the orders issued to the security forces to impose the plan, Brown, the information minister, added: "We are hoping there will be a level of understanding and that there will not be a need for exceptional force."