

Ebola crisis orphaning children amid fears of disease spread

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MONROVIA, Liberia (RNS) Ever since Frank Mulbah's mother died of Ebola in August, no one will go near him.

"I went to my relatives after my mother died, but they chased me away, even after I told them that I didn't have Ebola," said Frank, 12, who tested negative for Ebola at the hospital where his mother died.

As Ebola continues its rampage across Liberia and elsewhere in West Africa, thousands of children are taking a double hit: losing parents to the fatal virus and then being shunned by relatives who fear they will catch the disease.

The United Nations estimates the virus has orphaned nearly 4,000 children across the region, and that number could double in coming weeks. Aid groups, such as Doctors Without Borders, fear the orphans are at risk of starvation and disease.

The children also could pose a risk to others by spreading the disease if they are allowed to roam free without being tested for the virus.

Most children orphaned by Ebola are tested and found to be free of the virus, said Laurence Saily, a coordinator of an Ebola Treatment Center here run by Doctors Without Borders. But some are not tested.

"These children are supposed to be quarantined for 21 days before they are declared Ebola-free," she said. "But this does not take place because there's not enough facilities to cater to these children."

In Liberia, the hardest hit country, with nearly 1,000 deaths from Ebola as of last week, about half of all mothers in the country are raising their children alone because thousands of men died in a 1999-2003 civil war. So when these mothers

catch Ebola and die, their children have nowhere to turn.

Frank, whose father died in the civil war, said he found no one to care for him — neither in northwest Liberia, where he lived before dropping out of school, nor here in the capital, where he traveled in a desperate search for food and shelter from relatives who refused to take him in.

So he scavenges for food. “A day can pass without eating anything,” Frank said. “A few people will listen to you and give you food to eat, but the majority will chase you away.”

Some residents said they are sympathetic to the plight of orphans like Frank, but they have to first look out for the safety of their own families.

Faith Teta, 33, a mother of four, watched as two neighbors died a few months ago from Ebola, leaving behind five children. Their youngest child died a short time later, because everyone in the neighborhood was too scared of being infected to care for the 1-year-old, she said.

The remaining four children now wander Monrovia’s streets, dependent on the kindness of strangers, which is in short supply, Teta said. More often, the children encounter fear, horror, and even death threats.

“As parents, we all want to help them,” Teta said, “but people are endangering their own lives when they take in these children, and the lives of our family members.”

Teta blamed the government for being slow to respond to the disease and implement preventive measures to stem it.

“The public didn’t have any information about Ebola,” she said. “The government should take responsibility for its failure to stop this and help these kids.”

Sailly said the majority of people dying from the Ebola outbreak are ages 25 to 45, and have children 12 or younger.

“These children are now forced to drop out of school and work (to survive),” Sailly said. “It’s very painful to see them roaming in streets in search for food as their sole caregivers have already died.”

ChildFund, an international charity, started taking care of Ebola orphans this month by keeping them isolated for 21 days.

“The government should support such centers so that they can be able to provide a protective environment for these children,” said Saily.

Frank hopes his relatives will change their minds, but he isn’t hopeful. He tries not to think about getting home-cooked meals or an education.

“I don’t know when I’ll go back to school,” he said. “Right now I’m just looking for food and a place to live.”