

African Christian leaders debate whether Ebola is a curse from God

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NAIROBI, Kenya (RNS) As Western nations evacuate their citizens from West Africa's growing Ebola outbreak, some Christian leaders have begun to speak of the virus as a curse from God.

On Friday (August 8), the World Health Organization declared the Ebola crisis ravaging the region an international health emergency. On the same day, Nigeria became the latest country in West Africa to declare the virus crisis a national emergency, the day after Spain evacuated a priest and a nun from Liberia to Madrid.

On Saturday (August 9), a Congolese nun died from Ebola in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, the AP reported.

The outbreak started in December in Guinea, but was not discovered until March. It has since killed more than 1,000 people in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone.

"People are having different misconceptions that this is (a curse) from God," said Bishop Sumoward Harris, now retired from the Lutheran Church in Liberia. "This is depending on how they are interpreting the Bible. But I don't think God is angry and is issuing a punishment."

In Liberia, more than 100 Christian leaders meeting in early August declared that God was angry and Ebola a plague. They called for prayers to seek God's forgiveness for sins including corruption and immoral acts.

Liberia's Wilmot Kotati Bobbroh, head of the Living Water Pentecostal Church, later described the outbreak as a national curse brought by God to force repentance. Bobbroh said chlorine and soap were not working, but God's mercy was saving people.

In Sierra Leone, a similar view is gaining credence, according to Ebon James-Dekam, general secretary of the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone.

“It has some similarities to what happened when the HIV/AIDS epidemic first occurred,” said James-Dekam.

Initially those infected with Ebola in Sierra Leone had relied on treatment from traditional healers, but this was shown to be ineffective, she said.

“Virtually all churches are relying on medical professional for treatment,” she added.

Harris said the virus spread quickly because little was known about it and the government had not mounted a robust response.

“The people had started taking relatives to prayer houses, while others administered herbal treatment,” Harris said. “By the time we realized this was an epidemic, it had grown out of proportion. We are now overwhelmed,” said Harris, while citing an urgent need for medical personnel and services.