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Ebola Wiping Out Gains in Safe Motherhood

More than 800,000 pregnant women face much greater risk in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone

UNITED NATIONS, New York, 16 October 2014 — As the world intensifies its response to the Ebola crisis in West Africa, the needs of pregnant women must be addressed urgently to save the lives of mothers and infants, warns UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund.

"The reality is that pregnant women are facing a double threat – dying from Ebola and from pregnancy or childbirth, due to the devastating impact of Ebola on health workers and health systems," said UNFPA Executive Director, Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin. "Ebola is not only killing those infected, but also those affected. Pregnant women and girls are at greater risk."

UNFPA estimates that more than 800,000 women in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone would give birth in the next 12 months. All will require antenatal, delivery and postnatal care and related emergency obstetric support. But many pregnant women are afraid to visit, or are turned away from, overstretched health facilities, which puts them and their babies' lives at risk.

Of these women, more than 120,000 could die of complications of pregnancy and childbirth, if the required life-saving emergency obstetric care is not urgently provided.

"The situation for pregnant women in Ebola crisis countries is devastating. Gains in maternal health and family planning are being wiped out and women are desperate for information and services to protect their health and that of their babies," added Dr. Osotimehin. "Today, I call for urgent funding to meet the reproductive health needs of women and mothers in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone."

Furthermore, it has been estimated that 1.2 million women of childbearing age may lack access to the family planning services they require. This will increase the number of unexpected pregnancies in these countries.

UNFPA estimates that \$64.5 million is needed to provide reproductive and maternal health services in the next three months in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Before Ebola struck, the health systems in these countries were steadily improving and significant gains had been made in terms of increased access to maternal health and family planning services. However, most of these gains have been wiped out due to a breakdown in many aspects of the public health system.

To expand access to reproductive health information and services, UNFPA is using innovative approaches, such as tent-based outreach and mobile clinics. It is also recruiting several hundred midwives to support maternal health and family planning services. In addition, the Fund is tackling fears and misinformation and promoting health-seeking behaviour.

UNFPA is also providing emergency safe delivery kits, personal protective equipment and infection prevention supplies, such as Chlorine bleach, gloves and masks. The Fund is

expanding contact tracing nationwide in the three countries so that those who have come into contact with infected persons are monitored, and isolated and treated as necessary.

UNFPA's response is integrated into the newly formed United Nations Mission for Emergency Ebola Response (UNMEER). The Fund is also a member of the Global Ebola Response Coalition.

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