Freetown, Sierra Leone - 22 January 2015. Two successive emergency response campaigns in Sierra Leone to distribute anti-malarial drugs to people living in areas affected by the Ebola virus disease outbreak have successfully reached more than 2.5 million people, and significantly reduced the number of people with fever that might be mistaken for Ebola virus disease (EVD).

During the West African Ebola outbreak, people infected with malaria have been afraid to go to health centres for treatment or have been unable to receive treatment because some health centres were closed. To reduce malaria transmission and related deaths, WHO recommended a mass drug administration of anti-malarial medicines to all eligible people in Ebola hotspot areas.

“This intervention was done to reduce the number of febrile patients in the community so that people with fever caused by malaria would not be sent to the Ebola holding centres where they would be at risk of contracting Ebola,” said Dr Daniel Kertesz, the WHO representative in Sierra Leone.

“Malaria is a major public health problem in Sierra Leone causing thousands of deaths every year. With the current Ebola outbreak and its impact on the health system, we estimate that without this sort of pre-emptive intervention, malaria deaths could potentially double,” says Dr Pedro Alonso, Director of the WHO Global Malaria Programme.

A total of 8330 health workers were mobilized for the door-to-door distribution in 8 districts (Bombali, Kambia, Koinadugu, Moyamba, Port Loko and Tonkolili and Western Area - Urban and Rural). The campaign was implemented by the National Malaria Control Programme of the Ministry of Health and Sanitation with technical support and guidance by WHO in collaboration with MSF, UNICEF and other Roll Back Malaria partners.

Dr Alonso and the team have completed a preliminary assessment of the two malaria campaigns in the country. “While a detailed assessment of the achieved impact will be completed over the next few weeks, we have reasons to believe that the distribution of the anti-malarial medicines has a profound positive impact on the transmission of malaria and the number of suspected cases attending Ebola holding centres,” says Dr Alonso. “The community responded very positively - so positively that numbers of people wishing to receive the anti-malarial medicines were higher than expected,” he concluded.