

Ebola Outbreak Attributed to Economic Underdevelopment, Political Crises

African states allied with imperialism remain without resources to eliminate epidemic

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

Global Research, September 09, 2014
Pan-African News Wire

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)
Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

Nurses and physicians in Liberia where the Ebola virus has killed many people went out on strike on Sept. 1-2 due to lack of pay and the dangers associated with the minimal resources to address the burgeoning healthcare disaster.

This West African state that maintains historical economic and political ties with the United States, has witnessed nearly 700 documented deaths due to the Ebola Virus Disease. Nurses demanded that they be given the necessary protective and medical resources to both screen and treat patients impacted by the spreading sickness which in many cases proves fatal.

The nurses are determined to remain away from work until they have “personal protective equipment (PPEs), including the hazmat-style covering gear that guards against the spread of the disease,” a spokesman for the strikers at Monrovia’s John F. Kennedy hospital, John Tugbeh, told the media. (AFP, Sept. 1)

“From the beginning of the Ebola outbreak we have not had any protective equipment to work with. As result, so many doctors got infected by the virus. We have to stay home until we get the PPEs,” Tugbeh said.

With specific reference to physicians they point to the absence of adequate salaries to meet the rising cost of living. “Health workers have died (fighting Ebola), including medical doctors at ... JFK and to have them come to work without food on their table, we think that is pathetic,” George Williams, secretary general of the Health Workers Association of Liberia, told Reuters. (Sept. 2)

Outbreaks Spread Across Region

So far cases of the Ebola Virus Disease have been reported in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Conakry, Nigeria and Senegal. There are a small number of cases that have been reported in the northern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

International organizations concerned with relief and humanitarian crises in Africa and other parts of the world have stressed that the Western industrialized states, including the U.S., are not paying significant attention to the spread of the disease. There have been at least two cases reported in the U.S. acquired by people who were working in the healthcare sector in West Africa.

According to a statement issued by the World Health Organization (WHO), an affiliate of the United Nations, "The following countries share land borders or major transportation connections with the affected countries and are therefore at risk for spread of the Ebola outbreak: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Senegal," the agency advised, adding it will assist programs established in the newly-impacted states with "surveillance, preparedness and response plan."

Overall figures vary on the number of actual cases and deaths related to the disease. Some reports indicate that the number of fatalities is approximately 2,000 spanning Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Conakry.

The Doctors Without Borders (MSF) organization has also sounded the alarm about the rapid spread of the disease. MSF president, Joanne Liu, noted in an address to U.N. members in New York that the spread of the disease since March has forced the issue to the level of international security requiring specialized bio-medical disaster response units to stop the rapid increases of infections.

"Six months into the worst Ebola epidemic in history, the world is losing the battle to contain it," Liu stressed, criticizing what she characterized as "a global coalition of inaction."

Economic Impact of the Ebola Outbreak in the Region

Several research centers in West Africa and now the WHO are saying that the nations of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Conakry where the disease has hit hardest do not have the healthcare infrastructural and research capacity to effectively handle the crisis. Yet the advanced industrialized capitalist states have been relatively unresponsive to several warnings issued related to the potential global threat of the epidemic.

Ghana News Agency quoted a press release from "The Centre for African Democratic Affairs (CADA) which said that the current outbreak of Ebola may inflict broad economic damage on most West African countries if the situation is not contained as soon as possible. It further observed that the outbreak could have a direct financial effect on government budgets by increasing health expenditures significantly and creating an Ebola-induced economic slowdown on government revenue generation in a region where budgets were already hindered by low tax collection, corruption, mismanagement and bad governance." (Sept. 4)

This press release was issued and signed by the executive director of CADA, Mr. Frank Adarkwah-Yiadom, and went on to say that "The Centre for African Democratic Affairs (CADA) has gathered that Caterpillar, an American company has evacuated a handful of its employees from Liberia; Canadian Overseas Petroleum Limited has suspended a drilling project; Kenya Airways has suspended its flights to all the Ebola-hit West African countries; and the British Airways is canceling flights to a number of countries in West Africa due to the current outbreak of Ebola. CADA has also learnt that ExxonMobil and Chevron are waiting to see whether health officials can contain the danger."

Additional economic and political problems are developing as a result of the travel bans, the quarantining of communities and the lack of an effective response by the regional African Union (AU) as well as other continental organizations. Nonetheless, CADA appealed to regional governments to adopt rationale policies related to containing the spread of Ebola which could cause unnecessary disruptions. "Panic is avoided not just by combating an epidemic, but by being seen to do so", the press release said.

At present there have been over 30 deaths reported in northern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in Equateur province near the town of Boende, which is said to result from another strand of a similar virus. (news.sciencemag.org, Sept. 2) Located in the central region of Africa, the DRC, like other states in West Africa struck by the disease, is a vast mineral-rich country which hosts numerous multi-national firms which extract natural resources for export to largely western capitalist states.

Solutions to the Crisis Must be Long Term

Despite the reported record-levels of economic growth in West African states, the rate of real development is not keeping pace with the demands of the societies in the current period. The legacies of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism are still hampering the capacity of these governments to build the necessary healthcare facilities equipped with modern technology to tackle such an outbreak of a highly contagious infectious disease such as Ebola.

In the short term the affected states must be given the necessary support and assistance to both contain and treat those infected by the disease. However, a process of large-scale investments in healthcare systems has to take place in order to guard against future epidemics that will spread due to cross-border migration, the overall decline in living standards among the working class, farmers and the poor and the burgeoning class divisions in Africa stemming from the nature of the relations of production inherited and maintained by imperialism.

Under a socialist system of government, profits from the sale of mineral resources, agricultural cash crops and tourism would be returned to the majority of the people through the construction of hospitals and clinics, the training of medical and educational personnel and the effective mobilization of the masses. A regional approach to such epidemiological crises would provide for Africans from around the continent to address these problems on a collective basis.

The role of the West, including the U.S. cannot be relied upon beyond the current proliferation of news reports written about the situation in West Africa. Consequently, the Ebola Virus Disease epidemic is a manifestation of the need for Africa to become genuinely independent and self-determined based upon its own interests as opposed to the economic prerogatives of the western capitalist nations.

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