

Ebola Outbreak Prompts Calls for Travel Ban in the United States

Nigeria, Senegal declared free of the pandemic

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Global Research, October 21, 2014

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

Several United States congressional representatives have called for a ban on travel into the country from three West African states which have been the most severely impacted by the recent outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD). These proposals have specifically targeted President Barack Obama demanding that he institute the prohibition of anyone from Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia from entering the U.S.

Obama along with many interests in the corporate community have rejected a travel ban. In light of the corporate press coverage of the EVD outbreak that has reportedly killed in excess of 4,500 and infected over 9,000, all three West African states and others in the region have experienced significant losses in humanitarian assistance, trade and tourism.

Congressional hearings on the Ebola outbreak have degenerated into discussions about measures that do not emphasize the need to attack the disease and bring about its eradication. Efforts by officials within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) which sought to apportion blame on two nurses for not following protocol in treating the first patient Thomas Eric Duncan have been consistently refuted by the National Nurses United (NNU) through demonstrations and daily press releases, interviews and media conferences.

Issues of safety on the part of healthcare workers are a critical concern of the NNU. In Orange, California at St. Joseph Hospital, nurses were publically criticized by administrators saying that they were attempting to evoke fear among patients and employees when the nurses petitioned management for the implementation of basic medical guidelines for the handling of Ebola cases.

Nurses at the St. Joseph facility in Orange are not officially represented by the California Nurses Association (CNA) an affiliate of the NNU.

In an Oct. 17 press release from the NNU it notes that “St Joseph RNs were appalled at management’s reaction to their petition. First, the hospital allowed supervisors, and other RNs who don’t do direct patient care, to stage a protest on hospital property with signs saying ‘shame on CNA for preying on fear.’” (nationalnursesunited.com)

This same release went on to stress that “Second, the hospital administration issued a statement to the press—without responding to employees’ concerns—claiming they are ‘prepared to deal with infectious diseases’ and attacking the nurses’ union for using ‘scare tactics’ to ‘address labor issues.’”

Overreaction Takes Focus Away From Fighting Disease

Despite the calls for travel bans and other measures that tend to stigmatize West African expatriate communities, those relatives, workers and students who had contact with Thomas Eric Duncan, have been cleared of the threat of developing symptoms associated with EVD. The first wave of contacts was cleared on Oct. 20 and no further cases had been announced since the diagnosis of Nurse Amber Vinson of Dallas.

Another round of contacts is scheduled to be cleared by Nov. 7. Both Nina Pham and Amber Vinson are being treated in specialized units at Atlanta's Emory University Hospital and the National Institute of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland.

Reports were published on Oct. 20 speculating over the status of Pham's fiancé who is reportedly being monitored for EVD symptoms. The company Pham's friend works for issued a statement saying that he had not been diagnosed with the disease and that his fellow employees were not endangered. (International Business Times)

The Struggle Continues in West Africa

In West Africa, two nations, Nigeria and Senegal, were successful in isolating and eliminating the disease inside their countries. Senegal was reported to only have one case even though they share a border with one of the most severely affected states, Guinea-Conakry.

Early on in Oct., President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria declared the country Ebola free. The World Health Organization (WHO) agreed with this assessment on Oct. 20.

In regard to Senegal, the Associated Press noted that "On Friday (Oct. 17), WHO officials declared that the outbreak of the Ebola virus in Senegal was over. In a press release, the WHO stressed that Senegal's approach was "a good example of what to do when faced with an imported case of Ebola." (Oct. 20)

"The government's response plan included identifying and monitoring 74 close contacts of the patient, prompt testing of all suspected cases, stepped-up surveillance at the country's many entry points and nationwide public awareness campaigns," the WHO agency said in the same release.

With specific reference to Nigeria, the agency's (WHO) country director, Rui Gama Vaz, called it a "spectacular success story. The outbreak in Nigeria has been contained," he told a news conference in the political capital of Abuja. (independent.co.uk, Oct. 20)

Nonetheless, the official warned that "we must be clear that we only won a battle. The war will only end when West Africa is also declared free of Ebola."

Nigeria's outbreak began in July, when a Liberian-American development consultant, Patrick Sawyer, collapsed in the arrivals hall of Lagos airport. Many believed that Sawyer had traveled to Nigeria to seek health treatment where he later died.

Nigeria later reported eight deaths and nearly 20 cases. Schools were closed throughout the country until the nation's health system believed the threat had subsided.

Yet other countries such as Liberia remain in the grips of the outbreak. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf issued a "Letter to the World" through the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on Oct. 19 appealing for international assistance in efforts to treat patients and to

eradicate the disease in this West African state that has reported over 2,200 deaths from EVD since March. The Obama administration has deployed troops to Liberia to ostensibly assist in the building of field hospitals as part of a general escalation of military interventions in West Africa through the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM).

Johnson-Sirleaf said in the letter that the current situation “requires a commitment from every nation that has the capacity to help – whether that is with emergency funds, medical supplies or clinical expertise. We all have a stake in the battle against Ebola. It is the duty of all of us, as global citizens, to send a message that we will not leave millions of West Africans to fend for themselves.” (BBC, Oct. 19)

In Guinea, President Alpha Conde in an interview with eboladeeply.org emphasized the need for education about the virus’ transmission and the significant role of traditional leaders in the battle to eliminate the disease. He rejected the imposition of travel bans related to the most severely impacted states saying that the place to fight EVD is in West Africa itself.

“My message is clear: we need to fight on three fronts,” Conde said. “First, we must address the acute health crisis by containing the virus until it is gone. Second, after we have vanquished the virus we must make sure it doesn’t come back.”

However, the underlying solutions are clearly related to the overall development of Guinea and the entire region, saying “That’s why we also need to invest in our health-care systems. Third, we must stop the economic contraction that the virus has caused.”

These objectives will of course be difficult to achieve in light of the prevailing international division of economic power and distribution. All of the most impacted West African states are largely dependent upon the capitalist markets for the sale of strategic minerals and natural resources such as gold, bauxite and rubber as their principal means of generating foreign exchange.

Until Africa can retain the wealth produced by its land and people there will be no long term solutions to the problems associated with providing healthcare and social services to the majority of working people, farmers and youth. Lessons can be learned from socialist Cuba which although having faced a 55 year blockade by the U.S., has still been able to produce medical personnel and a healthcare system that is lauded internationally.

Today Cuba is on the frontlines in West Africa combating the EVD pandemic. Their work will set a sterling example for both underdeveloped and developed states to emulate.

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