

The Struggle Against the Ebola Pandemic Continues. Triggers Economic and Social Instability in West Africa

Liberia, Guinea laud progress while Sierra Leone battles renewed threats

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African leaders, healthcare professionals, international humanitarian organizations and others have praised the work done in battling the latest and most deadly outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD).

In Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, the epicenters of the latest outbreak of the deadly pandemic, there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of cases reported. It is estimated by the World Health Organization (WHO) based in Geneva, Switzerland and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States that some 9,500 people died among the 20,000 infected over the last year.

Nonetheless, even though there has been a precipitous decline in reported cases as borders re-open throughout West Africa and life is returning to some form of normalcy, experts and leaders warn that vigilance is still required. An increase in cases in Sierra Leone over the last several weeks has once again prompted concern.

In a recent statement from Geneva, it reports that

“According to WHO’s Feb. 25 Situation Report, the steep decline in case incidence in Sierra Leone from December to the end of January has halted, and transmission remains widespread. Case incidence decreased in Guinea in the week up to February 22 compared with the week before, and cases continue to arise from unknown chains of transmission. In Liberia, transmission continues at very low levels, with only one new case reported in the week up to February 22.” (World Health Organization)

Renewed Alert in Sierra Leone

Since last month there has been a new outbreak of cases in Sierra Leone of unknown origin. It is suspected that the EVD infections are being transmitted by workers in the fishing industry who have traveled inland to the capital of Freetown.

Overall says the WHO, “A total of 99 new confirmed cases of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) were reported in the week to 22 February. Guinea reported 35 new confirmed cases.”

A WHO summary report stresses that

“Transmission remains widespread in Sierra Leone, with 63 new confirmed cases. A spike of 20 new confirmed cases in Bombali is linked to the previously reported cluster of cases in the Aberdeen fishing community of the capital, Freetown.”

There were 14 confirmed new cases in Freetown during the same time frame, with additional infections being discovered from what is described as unknown chains of transmission in the capital and other locations. So serious is the current threat that Vice-President Samuel Sam-Sumana placed himself in quarantine after one of his security guards died from EVD on Feb. 24.

In a statement released by Sam-Sumana’s office on March 1, he says

“This virus has affected thousands of our people and has nearly brought our country to its knees. We all have a collective responsibility to break the chains of transmission by isolating the sick and reporting all known contacts, by not touching the dead ... We cannot be complacent. We must work together as a nation to end Ebola now.” (Associated Press)

Liberia Reports Rapid Decline in Cases

At the same time transmissions continue at very low levels in Liberia, with only one new confirmed case reported in the seven days leading up to the week of February 22. Liberia, which has had the highest number of deaths, succeeded in bringing its number of confirmed cases to almost zero while reopening schools as well as the borders with contiguous states.

During the last week of February, Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf visited the U.S. and met with Secretary of State John Kerry along with high-ranking members of Congress. She reported on developments in the fight against EVD and thanked Washington for its support.

Liberia, a longtime ally of the U.S., has served as a major partner with the Pentagon through the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). Thousands of Pentagon troops were deployed to the country at the height of the outbreak many of which have now been withdrawn.

In a press release issued by a Liberian-based news agency it says

“President Johnson-Sirleaf and her delegation on Thursday, February 26 held discussions with House Democratic and Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, Senators Lindsey Graham and Patrick Leahy of the Senate Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs. The Liberian leader also met Senator Jeffery Flake and members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; Senator Chris Coons of the Senate Subcommittee on Appropriation; Representative Ed Royce, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee along with ranking members including Representatives Elliott Engel, Chris Smith and Karen Baas.” (The News, March 2)

Ebola vaccine trials are continuing in Liberia

There are EVD vaccine trials also underway in Liberia where some 27,000 people may participate in a study to test the effectiveness of an experimental drug.

Front Page Africa newspaper based in the capital of Monrovia reported that

“The trial process, according to information, is being led by a Liberia-U.S. Clinical Research Partnership sponsored by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID). The trial is seeking volunteers from groups at particular risk of Ebola infection, including health care workers, communities with ongoing transmission, contact tracers and members of burial teams.”
(Feb. 27)

Clinical trial participants are assigned at random to one of three equally-sized groups.

Participants in one group will receive a placebo (saline), while the others will undergo a single injected dose of either the cAd3-EBOZ or the VSV-ZEBOV vaccines. The drugs were manufactured by pharmaceutical companies GlaxoSmithKline and New Link/Merck, which are based in Britain, the U.S. and Canada.

There are efforts underway to assure the public in Liberia that the vaccine trials are safe and voluntary. Last year during the initial phase of the outbreak, there were accusations that the EVD pandemic was caused by a U.S.-sponsored bio-defense research program that went awry. (Article by Dr. Cyril Broderick in the Liberian Daily Observer)

Although several EVD outbreaks have been reported in Africa since 1976, originating in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), then known as Zaire, the 2014-2015 pandemic has been the most virulent, widespread and long lasting. With specific reference to the ongoing trials of the vaccines which was initiated at the Redemption Hospital, a principal investigator of the Partnership for Research on Ebola Vaccine in Liberia (PREVAIL), Dr. Stephen Kennedy, disclosed that he has taken the vaccine claiming the drug is safe and that no one needs to be afraid of the injections.

One issue discussed by President Johnson-Sirleaf with U.S. officials was the need to invest in medical, communications and educational infrastructure in Liberia. The West African state which was founded by former enslaved Africans in the U.S. during the early decades of the 19th century has been largely under the control of Washington for nearly a century through the control of rubber and mineral production.

The legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism has underdeveloped Africa while European and North American states have grown wealthy as a result of the exploitation of agricultural commodities, mineral resources and labor. At present the Pentagon, the State Department and the Central Intelligence (CIA) are engaging in massive military and surveillance operations across West Africa under the guise of the so-called “war on terrorism.”

Nonetheless, instability is increasing throughout the region and only a resurgence of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist sentiment can move the people towards genuine independence and sovereignty.

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