

United States Forced to Acknowledge Role of Cuba in Ebola Response

Struggle against the disease continues in West Africa

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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Cuban healthcare workers have played a leading role on the African continent for decades. The revolutionary government views its work in the fight against the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) as a manifestation of internationalism and solidarity with Africa.

In a surprised twist in diplomatic protocol for Washington, the administration of President Barack Obama noted the role of Cuban doctors and nurses in Liberia where they will be working in a facility that is being reconstructed as a treatment center. Cuban healthcare workers have been deployed to Liberia and Sierra Leone, two of the three countries that have been at the epicenter of the most recent and widespread EVD outbreak.

Recently Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf inaugurated the first of 17 new Ebola Treatment Units (ETUs) that are being constructed with funds donated by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). At the ceremony in Congotown near the capital of Monrovia, Johnson-Sirleaf expressed her gratitude for the donor countries that have contributed to the project so far.

An article published by the Voice of America on Nov. 1, reported that “Some of the 90 doctors and nurses sent by Cuba to help the West African country, who attended the unveiling, will be working at a field hospital currently under construction at the former site of the Liberian Defense Ministry. It will be connected to the ETUs built with funds from the U.S. Agency for International Development, USAID.”

Later in this same article it states:

“The largest of the 17 ETUs that the U.S. military is building in Liberia – which will house 200 beds – is located only a few meters from the site of the former Liberian Defense Ministry. The Cuban doctors and nurses will be mainly responsible for its operation. The other ETUs contain about 100 beds and cost between \$ 250,000 and \$ 500,000 to build.”

From the perspective of Havana, the VOA notes that “Cuba’s official government website confirmed that Cuban health personnel will begin working Monday (Nov. 3) at the newly-opened unit.”

Cuban healthcare workers have a long history of responding to natural disasters such as the earthquake in Haiti during 2010, when they were the first to establish a field hospital. The Caribbean Island-nation has also trained countless numbers of medical personnel from

throughout world at the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM).

Despite over five decades of a blockade by the U.S. against Cuba, the government is able to take a principled approach in working with Washington in the battle against EVD.

Former President Fidel Castro wrote an article published by Granma International saying:

“We gladly cooperate with American personnel in this task (the fight against Ebola), and not in pursuit of peace between the two states that have been adversaries for many years but, in any case, for world peace.”

The VOA reports that “Ronald Hernandez Torres, one of the Cuban doctors who traveled to Liberia wrote in Spanish on his Facebook page saying ‘This unit has the best conditions for patient care, and the best professionals from different countries working side by side.’ U.S. Permanent Representative to the U.N., Ambassador Samantha Power, praised Cuba for its contribution to the fight against Ebola after returning from a recent trip to West Africa.”

The Struggle Continues Against EVD

Another physician died on Nov. 2 in Sierra Leone where the rise in outbreaks of EVD has shifted from rural eastern region of the country to the urban areas, including the capital of Freetown. Dr. Godfrey George reported that he was not feeling well and was transported from his place of work at the Kambia Government Hospital in the north of the country to Freetown where he expired.

Four other doctors have died after treating EVD patients. These deaths take a tremendous toll on the country since it is the Sierra Leone medical personnel who are on the frontline against the disease.

Just four years ago in 2010, it was reported that the country had two physicians for every 100,000 residents. The country underwent a civil war for a decade and has only begun to recover from the war as well as previous decades of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

A regional conference of the World Health Organization (WHO) began in Benin on Nov. 3. Benin, a former French colony in West Africa, has not reported any cases of the disease.

The international assistance in the campaign to defeat the Ebola outbreak was high on the WHO agenda in Benin. In a comment from Dr. Margaret Chan, Director-General of the WHO, she stressed that “The Ebola epidemic has set back political stability and economic recovery in the afflicted countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. She also said the disease has taken a “heavy toll on front-line domestic medical staff.” (Associated Press, Nov. 3)

In Gueckedou, Guinea, in the south of the country on the border with Sierra Leone and Liberia, where this outbreak of EVD is said to have originated, the United Nations Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) envoy, Anthony Banbury, reported that the number of cases in the area had been reduced significantly.

“The first case of Ebola, in December 2013, was just down the road from here, so I was very interested and coming and seeing the situation on the ground for myself,” Banbury said, pointing out that “happily, the number of cases in Guéckédou has gone down a lot.”

Banbury reported that the transmissions are declining and the number of cases in the area is almost zero. Even though there are cases outside the town, “there’s been good progress made over these past months.” (United Nations News Center, Nov. 1)

However, another person working in the field in Guinea, Elisabeth Faure, the country Director of the World Food Program (WFP), said that her agency has gotten involved with transporting medical personnel and equipment to treatment facilities. Faure’s observations paint another picture of developments inside the country.

“We’ve seen several waves, with the number of cases increasing and then declining and increasing and declining again,” Faure claimed. “But we’re now in a kind of third peak – by far the highest peak – with the highest number of cases since the epidemic started in Guinea.” (Guardian, Oct. 30)

Despite the international attention focused on the three African states most severely impacted, there still not enough resources being directed to the most distressed areas. Those solidarity and human rights organizations in the western industrialized states should demand that the governments in these countries provide the necessary medical personnel, medications and protective gear needed to successfully fight and eradicate EVD.

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Azikiwe](#)

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