

Clashes in Monrovia, Liberia as West African Ebola epidemic grows

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On Wednesday, security forces in the Liberian capital, Monrovia, fired live ammunition and tear gas at residents of the West Point Township protesting the imposition of a surprise quarantine aimed at containing the spread of the Ebola virus in the city.

Liberia has the highest death toll out of the West African nations affected by the Ebola outbreak. So far only three other countries have been affected by the epidemic—Guinea, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that Liberia accounts for at least 576 of a total estimated 1,350 fatalities. It has been two weeks since the WHO declared the Ebola epidemic in West Africa to be an international public health emergency.

The quarantine was announced by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in a radio address late Tuesday night. She also announced the quarantine of Dolo Town in Margibi County and the imposition of a nationwide curfew from 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. as the latest attempt to curb the rapid spread of the Ebola virus disease.

Soldiers and police moved in early Wednesday morning to impose the quarantine by blocking off access into West Point with barbed wire, as well as tables and chairs. The coast guard cordoned off the coastline, blocking fisherman and others from going out to sea. West Point residents did not learn of the confinement until they tried to leave for work or buy food Wednesday morning and found that they had been blocked by barbed wire and armed security forces.

Residents were further angered when they learned that only the West Point district commissioner, Miata Flowers, and her family were given notice of the quarantine and escorted out by the police.

Hundreds of protesters responded to the quarantine by throwing rocks at the police and moving to break the barricade three separate times but were driven back each time by gunfire from security forces injuring at least four

people. Businesses and shops throughout the rest of Monrovia closed down Wednesday out of fear of possible looting as a result of the unrest.

The forced isolation of West Point residents has resulted in skyrocketing prices for food and water in the district. The price of a cup of rice tripled overnight, while a pouch of water hovered between 150 (\$1.81) and 200 (\$2.40) Liberian dollars. As part of an effort to ease tensions Monrovia authorities began the delivery of rice, oil and other foodstuffs for distribution in the township.

The quarantine of West Point has trapped an estimated 75,000 people in one of Liberia's most notorious slums located on a small half-mile long peninsula just north of the city center. The typical home in the township is a rudimentary shack built out of corrugated zinc sheets with no running water or toilet. Makeshift lavatories on the Mesurado River, which runs through the area and the Atlantic Ocean beaches, have created seriously unsanitary conditions for those living in West Point. The recent addition of public restrooms did little to ease the health crisis in the district.

Last Saturday West Point residents attacked the M.V. Massaquoi School, which the government had quietly turned into an isolation center for people with Ebola symptoms. Upset that the government had begun transferring people possibly infected with Ebola to the township without notice, protesters broke into the school and took bedding and other supplies.

Though Ebola virus disease outbreaks have previously only affected rural areas, the disease has now moved into major urban centers including Monrovia in Liberia and Conakry in Guinea posing new dangers and challenges.

The emergence of the Ebola virus in highly concentrated slum areas like West Point threatens to devastate a significant portion of the population in Monrovia. David Kaggawa, a Ugandan doctor with the WHO, told the *New York Times* that the Liberia

government was completely unprepared to deal with the Ebola epidemic in Monrovia. “This is our first experience in a capital city,” he said, “and all the indications are that it spreads faster in a city because people are living closer together.”

Making matters worse the public health system in Monrovia has completely collapsed due to the Ebola outbreak. According to Dr. Joanne Liu, the president of Doctors Without Borders, Liberians now lack access to the most basic of health care, including malarial drugs for children and medical care for pregnant women. “All the health care facilities are basically closed in Monrovia,” she stated in an interview with the *New York Times*. “There may be some marginal activities, but basically there’s nothing really working right now.”

Countries with adequate resources and developed health care systems, such as the United States, face little risk from an epidemic of the virus. Since Ebola spreads through contact with infected blood, feces or vomit it is much more difficult to contract than other viruses that are transmitted through the air or casual contact. With the appropriate capacity to isolate infected individuals, training of health care professionals and strict protocols for the handling of patients and corpses the spread of Ebola can be easily contained.

These are all things that health care professionals in the deeply impoverished West African countries are severely lacking. The poor and failing infrastructure in Liberia is largely responsible for the severity and reach of the current Ebola epidemic. Liberia’s health care infrastructure was devastated by two civil wars, fuelled by the CIA, which took place between 1989 and 2003. Today Liberia is one of the least economically developed and most impoverished countries in the world. The World Food Programme estimates that 64 percent of Liberia’s population lives in poverty, while 1.3 million people live in extreme poverty.



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