Cuts to World Health Organization budget intensify Ebola epidemic

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As many as 1,900 have died and more than 3,000 have been infected in the worst Ebola outbreak since the discovery of the disease in 1976, which has already claimed more lives than all previous 20 outbreaks combined.

Estimates by the World Health Organization (WHO) predict that as many as 20,000 more may die from the disease during the next three to six months.

The spread of the disease is accelerating, according to experts, with at least 400 fatalities during the past week alone. The virus, which originated in the forests of southeast Guinea before infecting large numbers in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and a handful in Nigeria, has now spread to a fifth country, Senegal, the World Health Organization has confirmed.

The epidemic in West Africa is a product of the disastrous social conditions in Africa and the class warfare austerity policies imposed by the ruling class globally in response to the crisis of world capitalism. Since the financial collapse of 2008, the WHO budget has been slashed by at least $1 billion, leading to layoffs of veteran medical staff and a 35 percent reduction of the agency's emergency response staff. The budget for WHO is now less than $4 billion, significantly less than the $6 billion budget of the US Center for Disease Control (CDC).

WHO budget documents state that this became necessary given "the new reality of financial austerity." The WHO is forced to rely on donations; dues payments from UN members cover only 20 percent of its budget. The UN is now calling for $600 million in emergency funds to the battle the spread of the virus.

"My budget [is] highly earmarked, so it is driven by what I call donor interests. When there's an event, we have money. Then after that, the money stops coming in, then all the staff you recruited to do the response, you have to terminate their contracts," said WHO director general Margaret Chan in an interview with the *New York Times*.

Previous outbreaks of H7H9 and MERS-CoV were better contained because they occurred in countries with more developed medical capacity, whereas social and medical infrastructure in West Africa is extremely limited, Chan said.

"This is happening in countries that just came out of 10 years of war and conflict, with very little capacity by way of health systems," the WHO director said.

Containing the outbreak was only possible through a coordinated worldwide effort. "This is a global issue, is a global threat and we must have a global solution," Chan said.

WHO assistant director Keiji Fukuda echoed these comments, saying, "Responding to outbreaks and infectious disease emergencies means that you want to have a core program, a core group of people that are able to move as quickly as possible. One of the impacts of the budget cuts was to reduce that ability to move that quickly because of decreases in staffing."

Nonetheless, the cuts suffered by the WHO are hampering any coordinated international response. The outbreak has revealed the incapacity of NGOs such as Doctors Without Borders (DWB) to cope with large-scale health emergencies, while also demonstrating that the WHO is too weak to successfully coordinate the international response. Communications director for DWB Jason Cone said that the epidemic has revealed a "huge vacuum in leadership" that the WHO has been unable to fill.

A growing line of patients has formed outside DWB's ELWA 3 medical facility in Monrovia, which currently has only 160 beds, according to *All Africa*. DWB personnel estimate that at least 800 more beds

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are necessary to meet the current level of infected Liberians. DWB's five Ebola treatment centers in West Africa currently hold only 480 beds in total.

"Every day we have to turn sick people away because we are too full," DWB's coordinator at ELWA 3, Stephen Liljegren, told *All Africa*.

Top medical officials have spoken in the strongest possible terms about the dangers posed by the uncontrolled spread of the virus.

In a speech to UN member states, Doctors Without Borders President Dr. Joanne Liu warned that the disease would continue to spread without a major push for containment.

"Six months into the worst Ebola epidemic in history, the world is losing the battle to contain it," Liu said. "In west Africa, cases and deaths continue to surge. Riots are breaking out. Isolation centres are overwhelmed. Health workers on the front line are becoming infected and are dying in shocking numbers."

"It is impossible to keep up with the sheer number of infected people pouring into facilities. In Sierra Leone, infectious bodies are rotting in the streets," Liu said.

Liu called on the major powers to deploy military biohazard specialists to help contain the outbreak. Without this deployment, we will never get the epidemic under control," Liu said.

US Center for Disease Control (CDC) director Tom Frieden spoke in similarly dire terms about the situation in West Africa. "There is a window of opportunity to tamp this down, but that window is closing," Frieden said. "The level of outbreak is beyond anything we've seen—or even imagined."

The unprecedented scale of the outbreak has underlying social and political causes. The domination of Africa by the imperialist powers produces and maintains the conditions of unfathomable poverty and absence of social infrastructure. The transnational banks and corporations that control the world economy systematically steal vast quantities of wealth through the exploitation of Africa's cheap labor and extraction of the continent's raw materials.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the imperialist powers allocated enormous technical and financial resources to militarize the African continent, in order to safeguard these economic interests. The US Africa Command was officially formed in 2008 to coordinate the ever-growing list of US military interventions across the continent.

While marshaling vast resources to expand their military presence on the continent, the dominant capitalist governments have failed to mount any significant effort to contain Ebola, instead enforcing budget cuts to public health funding and allowing basic social infrastructure to deteriorate.

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