

# Ebola outbreak grows

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The Ebola virus is quickly overwhelming West African countries. The infection rate in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea reached almost 100 new cases a day over the last week.

In total, there are 4,784 confirmed cases and about 2,400 deaths from the current outbreak, twice as many as all previous outbreaks combined. The epidemic has achieved such extraordinary proportions because of the abysmal state of health care in West Africa, one of the world's poorest regions. Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea have a combined population of 20 million, but health care budgets totaling less than \$900 million a year, or \$45 per person.

Given the lack of infrastructure, inadequate services, and also the social stigma associated with the disease, the real number of cases could be significantly higher than those reported. The World Health Organization (WHO) has said that the total number of cases could top 20,000 before the epidemic is brought under control.

An unrelated outbreak of Ebola has also begun in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). From an initial case reported August 26, there are now 62 cases with 31 deaths. Like other West African countries, the DRC is extremely poor, with the second lowest Human Development Index in the world.

Ebola is transmitted to humans by consuming the meat of wild animals. Although highly infectious and deadly, Ebola can only be transmitted through direct contact with the bodily fluids of someone who has the disease. In areas with clean water, effective sanitation, and trained health care workers, Ebola has little opportunity to spread.

This is the first outbreak where Ebola has spread rapidly in an urban environment. The weekly number of new cases in Liberia's capital, Monrovia, grew to over 200 in the first part of September. A country of 4 million, Liberia has only six ambulances. Only 3

percent of Liberians have access to running water.

*Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), an NGO working to combat the outbreak, estimates that Liberia will need an additional 800 hospital beds just to handle the current cases. Currently MSF has 480 beds in the country.

The abysmal state of health care in these three countries is highlighted by the large number of health care workers who have been infected in the course of the epidemic. In total, 301 health care workers have contracted the disease, of which 144 have so far died. In response to the crisis, nurses at John F. Kennedy hospital in Monrovia went on strike last week, demanding better pay and protective equipment.

The economic impact could potentially kill more people through starvation and related diseases than the Ebola outbreak itself. Agriculture has been particularly hard hit, with fields abandoned and trade halted due to border closings and quarantines. The United Nations noted that staple foods had more than doubled in price in Monrovia.

Agriculture accounts for 25 percent of the economy of Guinea, and 40 percent of the economies of Liberia and Sierra Leone. In Sierra Leone over 70 percent of the workforce is employed in agriculture.

International aid to combat the epidemic has been minimal. The United States has contributed just over \$100 million in the course of the nine-month outbreak. On Wednesday, in the same speech in which he called for \$500 million to arm and train Syrian rebels, President Barack Obama claimed, "It is America—our scientists, our doctors, our know-how—that can help contain and cure the outbreak of Ebola." He outlined no specific plans for assistance. The Pentagon, however, announced on Monday that it would be establishing a 25-bed field hospital in Liberia in order to treat international aid workers.

MSF has repeatedly called for US military

intervention to combat the epidemic, with its president Joanne Liu criticizing the current deployment as insufficient. MSF has a long history of supporting US interventions on “humanitarian” grounds, from its early work supporting the CIA arming of Mujahadeen in Afghanistan in the 1980s, to its support for US intervention over the Ghouta gas attack in Syria a year ago, which was later shown to have been carried out by the US-backed rebels.

The current limited military involvement of the US is being conducted by the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), the same military command that oversees drone strikes in East Africa. The creation of AFRICOM in 2007 was controversial, given US imperialism’s historic crimes on the continent. AFRICOM is currently still headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany.



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