

Obama uses Ebola crisis to “surge” 3,000 troops into West Africa

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The Obama administration and the Pentagon have announced the “surge” of 3,000 US troops into West Africa, ostensibly in response to the escalating spread of the Ebola virus in the region.

The militarized response to the deadly epidemic has underscored Washington’s increasingly heavy reliance on its residual military superiority in what has become a second “scramble for Africa,” pitting the US against China in a struggle for control of the continent’s markets and resources.

Speaking at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia Tuesday afternoon, President Barack Obama declared: “Faced with this outbreak, the world is looking to the United States and it is a responsibility we are prepared to embrace. We are prepared to take leadership on this.”

Obama cast the Ebola outbreak as a “national security priority” for the United States based not on a threat that the disease could spread to the US, which he described as “extremely low,” but rather that it would trigger the destabilization of West Africa posing “profound economic, political and security implications.”

“It’s a potential threat to global security if these countries break down,” the US president warned.

For all of Obama’s talk of the world looking to the US to lead in the fight against Ebola, the reality is that US spending, amounting to barely \$100 million over the past nine months, has been widely viewed as negligible.

Moreover, Tuesday’s announcement of the massive military deployment followed by barely a week an earlier US proposal for the Pentagon to build a 25-bed field hospital in the Liberian capital of Monrovia that would be dedicated to providing care to foreign health and aid workers. The plan met with widespread condemnation as less than a drop in the bucket in the

face of an epidemic whose infection rate has risen to nearly 100 new cases a week and which, according to some estimates, could claim up to a million victims over the next several months, if it is not contained.

The sudden about-face is based, as Obama’s speech indicated, not on any new assessment of the threat posed to the lives of West Africans, but on a changed analysis of how to advance US strategic objectives in the region.

The deployment of US forces in West Africa follows a long line of similar “humanitarian” operations designed to further imperialist interests, ranging from the occupation of Somalia on the pretext of combatting famine in 1992 to the deployment of US military task forces in Southeast Asia after the 2005 tsunami and in Haiti in the wake of the 2010 earthquake.

Obama revealed in his Atlanta address that Maj. Gen. Darryl Williams, head of US Army Africa, the core unit of the Pentagon’s Africa Command (AFRICOM), has already arrived in the Liberian capital of Monrovia to oversee the creation of what the Pentagon described as a Joint Force Command to provide “regional command-and-control support to US military activities and facilitate co-ordination with US government and international relief efforts.” In addition, a “staging area” will be set up in Senegal. Thousands of troops are to be flown into the region over the next two weeks.

The US president’s staging of his address at the CDC headquarters in Atlanta represented something of an anomaly, as the overwhelmingly military character of the US operation would have made the Pentagon a far more appropriate venue.

The CDC’s budget represents one percent of the Pentagon’s, and public health in the US has been subjected to a relentless series of draconian budget cuts over the past five years, resulting in the destruction of

some 42,000 jobs in the sector.

As for the Ebola initiative itself, the administration has asked Congress for \$58 million for the CDC to work on developing an effective vaccine and \$30 million to send CDC workers and equipment to Liberia. This compares with \$500 million that it is seeking to redirect from the Pentagon's Overseas Contingency Operations funding to pay for military operations in the region.

While in his remarks Tuesday Obama portrayed the massive military deployment as a means of facilitating the work of medical teams being sent to the region, it is not clear that the US even has such personnel available. A White House "fact sheet" mentioned only the dispatch of 65 members of the United States Public Health Service Commissioned Corps to staff the initially proposed hospital for health care workers.

China has itself sent 174 doctors into the region, while Cuba is dispatching 165 health care workers.

The US Agency for International Development (AID) has carried an appeal on its web site over the past several weeks calling on private sector medical professionals to volunteer to work in the region.

Non-governmental organizations active in the region have voiced concern over the military deployment involving armed US troops on the ground. Doctors Without Borders (MSF), which has been among the most prominent in anti-Ebola efforts, cautiously welcomed the increased US resources, while stressing "the need for this support to be of medical nature only." Its statement added, "Aid workers do not need additional security support in the affected region."

Meredith Stakem, a spokesperson for Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in West Africa, made the same point. "What we don't want to see is the US military going in with guns and enforcing quarantines," she said.

It appears, however, that precisely such forces will be deployed. In a briefing Tuesday, Michael Lumpkin, assistant secretary of defense for special operations low-intensity conflicts, declined to specify what military assets would be deployed, saying that the Pentagon was "continuing to evaluate" what forces were needed.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, however, a Pentagon official told the British *Daily Mail* that combat-equipped soldiers and Marines "will be on hand and ready for anything."

The official added: "The president has ordered us to

help, and we're eager to do it. Now it looks like we're going to be the lead dog, and that's bound to make a lot of people nervous. It's understandable ...

no one wants US personnel enforcing someone else's martial law if things go south and the entire region is at risk."

A direct request for the US military to intervene came from Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who has faced mounting popular opposition over her government's incompetent and punitive response to the Ebola outbreak. Last month, she ordered the sprawling Monrovia slum district of West Point, a hotbed of anti-government sentiment, sealed by security forces, quarantining tens of thousands of people under increasingly desperate conditions. The action resulted in violent clashes between residents and troops.

Liberia, whose government was described by *Foreign Policy* as "kleptocratic and nepotistic," is among Washington's closest and most servile African client states—even as it, too, has signed trade deals with China. Its security forces have been trained by the Pentagon under a program known as "Operation Onward Liberty" in which US special forces troops "mentor and advise their Liberian counterparts."

Since founding AFRICOM in 2007, Washington has steadily expanded its operations, which now include active armed interventions in Libya, Nigeria, Somalia and Central Africa as well as training and joint exercises with African military forces throughout the continent. It has until now, however, been unable to establish its headquarters on the continent—it remains in Stuttgart, Germany—because of popular hostility to Western colonialism. It remains to be seen whether the current Liberian operation will be used to remedy that problem.



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