

# Ebola crisis: Major powers line up to send troops to Africa

Jean Shaoul  
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The imperialist powers are using the West Africa Ebola outbreak as a cover for re-establishing or strengthening their military presence in their former colonies. Their aim is to further their geo-strategic interests including control of the region's offshore oil resources. To this end, rather than sending financial or healthcare assistance, they are deploying military forces.

The United States is spending \$750 million over the next six months to send troops to Liberia, its first and only African colony. The operation is being run by the US Armed Forces Africa Command (AFRICOM).

AFRICOM will deploy 3,200 troops, mostly from the 101st Airborne Division, to assist in the construction of emergency Ebola treatment units, with a Joint Force Command Headquarters to be established to oversee the operation in Liberia.

There are currently 539 members of the armed forces at the joint operations centre in Monrovia, the capital. After almost a month, all the troops have to show for their deployment is a 25-bed clinic to treat healthcare workers who come into contact with Ebola. They will run five mobile labs to carry out tests for the virus, with plans for another four. The hospital is to be staffed and equipped, but by other countries under the direction of the Liberian and US governments.

The choice of Liberia is no accident. It is the only country in Africa that had ever expressed any interest in hosting AFRICOM's headquarters, which currently operates from a base thousands of miles away in Stuttgart, Germany.

The operations centre will be in addition to the US drone bases across Africa, chiefly—and the only one that is officially acknowledged—that at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, adjacent to Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. It has been used for launching drone missile

attacks and air strikes in Yemen, Somalia and East Africa. This is part of a broader “pivot to Africa” that has involved at least one US operation a day somewhere in the continent, in conjunction with most of the African military forces.

Britain, which rarely misses an opportunity to follow in Washington's slipstream, is to send 3,000 troops to Sierra Leone. General Sir Nick Carter, who led British forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, is advising the government on the number of troops, the use of the navy to patrol the coast, and even the establishment of military blockades and curfews in towns and villages deep inside the country to restrict movement.

A defence source told the *Mail on Sunday*, “From a military perspective, Ebola is like a biological warfare attack and should be countered accordingly. There needs to be a clampdown on human movement inside Sierra Leone and possibly to and from the country between now and late 2015 when it is hoped that an antidote will have been developed.”

By the end of next month, there will be 750 British military personnel in Sierra Leone, a British colony until 1961 that is one of the world's main sources of diamonds. Britain already has troops in a base located south of the capital, Freetown, established in 2002 after its intervention in the civil war in 2000. With the ongoing withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, this will be the largest overseas deployment of British troops.

Britain is also sending 91 army medical staff. But this paltry number of medics is dwarfed by the 256 medical personnel that the impoverished 11 million-strong country of Cuba has already sent, with hundreds more being prepared for the Ebola mission.

The British government is also sending a hospital ship, the Argus, and three helicopters to help tackle the

Ebola crisis for at least six months. The 100-bed Argus is carrying supplies, weaponry and equipment, including protective suits. As well as transporting 225 military personnel and hardware, the ship will act as a base for the three Royal Navy Merlin helicopters that are to be used for surveillance work and the transport of equipment and personnel. The Argus has its own mini air traffic control centre, Flyco, and will act as a giant landing stage for the boats operated by 80 Royal Marines, whose role is to enforce security for the British operation.

The ship will provide medical services for British personnel, both military and civilian, who fall ill while in Sierra Leone. But the 80 strong civilian medical staff on board—out of a crew of 140—will not be treating anyone who succumbs to Ebola. Instead, any of the staff who contract the disease will be treated on shore.

Again, like its US counterpart, the medical relief effort is to be based largely on volunteers. More than 800 National Health Service doctors, nurses and paramedics have signed up to work in Sierra Leone. The first volunteers, whose salaries will be paid by the Department of International Development, are not expected to arrive until November or December.

France, for its part, is to send troops to Guinea, a country that it dominated until 1958 and which has the world's largest proven bauxite reserves, which are exported and refined into aluminium elsewhere. It will also build a 50-bed hospital.

Last month Germany agreed to deploy 100 troops and two Transall military transport planes to Senegal, as part of a Franco-German mission to deliver supplies to West Africa. The German armed forces will also set up a 50-bed treatment centre in Liberia. Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen is calling for medical volunteers rather than deploying army medical staff, as part of a wider bid to assert Germany's interests in the region and increase public support for deployment of German troops overseas.

On Saturday, the aid charity Oxfam called for troops to be sent to West Africa, along with funding and medical staff, to prevent the Ebola outbreak becoming the “definitive humanitarian disaster of our generation.” It said that there was a critical need for logistical support and that countries that did not commit military personnel were “costing lives.” Oxfam even called on the Australian government to back the Labour

Party's demands for troops to be sent to the region.

What few commentators are mentioning is that one factor that lies behind the deployment of troops by the major imperialist powers is the discovery of oil in West Africa. According to a *Business Day* report last May, the region accounts for one third of the world's new oil discoveries. The US Geological Survey has reported that the West African Coastal Province has an estimated 3,200 million barrels of oil.

New finds have been made in Liberia and Sierra Leone and there has been a flurry of exploration in Gabon, Guinea, Ghana and Mali, with Russia's Lukoil about to start exploration in Cote d'Ivoire. According to a briefing paper by Ecobank, the Pan African Bank, entitled “Exploration in West Africa's Frontier Could Unlock 9 Billion Barrels in 2014,” oil and gas independent companies have spent \$US200 million over the past four years acquiring assets in some of West Africa's less explored countries, notably, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Liberia. These explorations follow on the finds in East Africa where China is actively engaged in establishing itself as a major player.

The military response to the Ebola crisis is thus bound up with a second “Scramble for Africa” that is pitting the major imperialist powers against Russia and China in the struggle for markets and resources.



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