

# Ebola epidemic continues to ravage West Africa

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According to the latest report from the World Health Organization released on Wednesday, the death toll from the ongoing Ebola epidemic has officially surpassed 6,000, with more than 17,145 reported cases of infection. Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Senegal, Mali, Nigeria, Spain and the United States have had person-to-person transmissions of the disease. Now entering its second year, the ongoing epidemic is the deadliest and most widespread outbreak of the Ebola virus on record.

Accounting for more than 99 percent of infections and deaths, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia continue to be the epicenter of the epidemic. While the number of newly reported cases has fallen significantly in Liberia and Guinea, with fewer than 600 new cases reported in the two countries combined in the last three weeks, the situation continues to be quite acute in Sierra Leone, where more than 1,400 new cases were reported in the same time period.

The economies of the three already deeply impoverished sub-Saharan countries have been seriously crippled by the effects of the Ebola crisis. Prior to the Ebola outbreak, the three countries had been experiencing relatively high GDP growth rates and the trend was expected to continue.

On Tuesday, the World Bank significantly revised downward projected GDP growth rates for 2014. The World Bank projects that the 2014 growth rate in Liberia will be 2.2 percent, down from a pre-epidemic projection of 5.9 percent; in Sierra Leone the growth rate is expected to be 4 percent compared to a pre-epidemic projection of 11.3 percent; while in Guinea the growth rate is expected to be 0.5 percent, down from a pre-epidemic projection of 4.5 percent.

As a result of the epidemic and ensuing crisis, it is projected that the economies of Sierra Leone and

Guinea will shrink significantly next year (-2 percent and -.2 percent), while Liberia's economy will only grow by two percent, half the rate projected prior to the Ebola crisis.

The World Bank estimates that declining revenues and increased spending resulting from the Ebola crisis have cost the three governments combined more than half a billion dollars in 2014. If the epidemic continues for another year, the World Bank projects a total fiscal impact on the West African region of anywhere between \$3.8 billion and \$32.6 billion, depending on the severity.

The response of the great powers to the outbreak has been wholly inadequate and driven entirely by geopolitical considerations. In the guise of building emergency testing and treatment facilities, the Obama administration dispatched several thousand soldiers to Liberia, exploiting the crisis as a means of gaining a military foothold on the African continent.

While foreign troops have been deployed to construct Ebola treatment centers, the responsibility for staffing these facilities has been left to an ad hoc grouping of NGOs, missionaries and local workers. The underfunded and corrupt national governments in West Africa are relying on NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF—Doctors Without Borders), which has provided volunteer doctors and nurses and employs thousands of local workers to undertake much of the most hazardous work, such as handling and burying the dead.

MSF released a statement on Tuesday in which it condemned the limited response to the crisis in West Africa by Western governments as “slow and uneven.” Dr. Joanne Liu, international director of MSF, criticized the decision to leave much of the direct response up to volunteers and untrained local workers.

“It is extremely disappointing that states with biological-disaster response capacities have chosen not to utilize them,” she said. “How is it that the international community has left the response to Ebola—now a transnational threat—to doctors, nurses and charity workers?”

Working conditions for doctors, nurses, as well as other workers, are physically and mentally taxing and the risk of transmission of Ebola from patients to health care workers is high. Through the end of November a total of 622 health care workers have been infected with Ebola, and of these, 346 have died.

On November 25, burial workers in the city of Kenema in southeastern Sierra Leone went on strike and dumped 15 bodies around the local hospital in protest against the nonpayment of two months’ extra risk payments promised by the government. Earlier in the month, 400 health care workers at an Ebola treatment center in Bandajuma in eastern Sierra Leone went on strike over the same issue.

While the Ebola crisis continues to rage in West Africa still largely out of control, the issue has been all but been dropped by the American political establishment and US media coverage has largely disappeared in the wake of November’s midterm elections.

No new cases of Ebola either contracted overseas or transmitted in the United States have been reported since the end of October. The media frenzy over the transmission of Ebola to several nurses in Texas and an attempt to enforce a quarantine on an asymptomatic nurse, who had returned from treating Ebola victims in Africa, were driven by political calculations by both the Democrats and Republicans prior to the elections. Meanwhile, the approval by Congress of a proposed \$6.3 billion in emergency funding for combating the Ebola virus remains in doubt.



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