

# The Ebola epidemic, imperialism and the political economy of social murder

Evan Blake  
23 May 2026

*When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another such that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death ... when it knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual ... no man sees the murderer... But murder it remains.*

—Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845)

The Ebola epidemic now tearing through the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Uganda is routinely described in the press as a natural disaster. This is a mystification. “Natural disaster,” like the older phrase “act of God,” is a formula for resignation, presenting as fate what is in fact the outcome of decisions, structures and interests that can be identified and held to account.

The emergence of a pathogen from the animal world is, in the first instance, a natural event. But modern science has transformed humanity’s relationship to such events. The tools to detect an outbreak in its first days, to trace and isolate its spread, and to treat the infected exist. Whether a zoonotic spillover becomes a contained cluster or a regional catastrophe is therefore not a question of nature but of society.

The conditions under which such spillovers occur are themselves products of social development—the encroachment of resource extraction into isolated ecosystems, accelerating deforestation, the congregation of displaced populations in unplanned settlements and, above all, the disruptions of climate change. A 2022 study published in *Nature* projects that climate- and land-use-driven shifts in animal ranges will generate thousands of new opportunities for cross-species viral transmission in the coming decades, concentrated in Asia and Africa.

The same technological advances that have made the world more dangerous have also given humanity the means to master these dangers. But that capacity is trapped within an anarchic social order incapable of using it. A globally integrated economy of immense productive power remains fractured into rival nation-states and subordinated to the profit of a financial oligarchy that

can neither plan rationally nor act in the common interest.

It is in this precise sense that the deepening Ebola epidemic constitutes social murder. The mass death unfolding today in central Africa is the product of crimes of both commission and omission, carried out by a ruling class that possessed every capacity to prevent it and chose to dismantle the defenses that stood in its way.

With over 650 suspected cases, more than 150 suspected deaths and the virus already seeded in the cities of Bunia, Goma, and Kampala, the preventable death toll will likely mount into the thousands and possibly the tens of thousands in the months ahead. The Bundibugyo strain now circulating has no approved vaccine and no specific treatment, and in the two previous outbreaks it killed between 30 and 50 percent of those infected. World Health Organization (WHO) officials concede that even a candidate vaccine remains six to nine months away.

The virus has emerged in a region already enduring one of the gravest humanitarian crises on earth. Eastern Congo has been ravaged by more than 30 years of war, in which over 6 million people have died, the great majority from disease and starvation. More than 7 million are internally displaced, many of them packed into camps without clean water or sanitation; some 27 million face acute hunger. Cholera, measles and mpox circulate continuously. These are precisely the conditions in which a hemorrhagic fever amplifies and spreads. Jean Kaseya, director-general of Africa CDC, said he was in “panic mode” given the absence of medicines, vaccines and protective equipment, adding bluntly: “We don’t have manufacturing for PPE.”

Against this backdrop, the response of the Trump administration has been a fusion of nationalist and anti-scientific policies. It invoked the rarely used Title 42 authority to bar non-citizens who had recently been in the DRC, Uganda or South Sudan, ordering all US-bound flights carrying such travelers funneled into a single airport. On Wednesday, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) forced an Air France flight from Paris to Detroit to divert to Montreal because a single Congolese passenger, asymptomatic and posing no danger, had boarded “in error.” Since Ebola cannot spread without symptoms, the diversion was not a public health measure but nativist theater. Washington’s only contribution to fighting the epidemic at its source is a pledge of roughly \$13 million, a drop in the bucket compared to what is actually required.

More fundamentally, over the past 15 months the Trump administration has waged a scorched-earth policy aimed at

destroying the very programs that could have stopped this outbreak at its source. Since January 2025, it has terminated the \$100 million STOP Spillover program built to detect hemorrhagic fevers in exactly this region, dismantled the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), gutted the PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) networks that formed the backbone of African disease surveillance, withdrawn from and defunded the WHO and imposed a gag order severing the CDC from its international counterparts.

Each of these measures had immediate, lethal consequences on the ground. Laboratories went dark, contact tracing collapsed and trained personnel were dispersed. The result was that the virus circulated undetected in Ituri for some six weeks. This is social murder in the most exact sense Engels intended—death inflicted not by an individual hand but by a ruling class that knowingly maintains the conditions that guarantee it.

The crimes of the Trump administration are only the latest in more than a century of imperialist subjugation and plunder. Under Belgian King Leopold II, as many as 10 million Congolese died under a regime of forced labor and terror. These conditions incubated epidemic disease, including the strain of HIV that genetic studies trace to Kinshasa around 1920. In 1961, the CIA helped engineer the murder of Patrice Lumumba and installed the US-backed dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, under whom the country's health infrastructure was reduced to ruins.

The wars that have raged in eastern DRC since 1996, now driven by the Rwandan-backed M23 militia, are struggles for the coltan and gold of the Kivus and Ituri—the precise territory where Ebola now rages. These minerals, along with the cobalt of the south, flow through the supply chains of the world's largest corporations into the smartphones, laptops and electric vehicles of the advanced economies, enriching mining conglomerates, such as Glencore and the technology giants they supply. The Trump administration's "Washington Accord," struck last year, was a naked bid to secure privileged US access to this mineral wealth, secured by the same ruling circles now content to let the region's workers die.

Furthermore, the present catastrophe is the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic by other means. Well before that pandemic, a neo-Malthusianism had revived among broad layers of the bourgeoisie—the recasting of the poor as a surplus burden on a planet of finite "carrying capacity," a doctrine that treats mass death not as a catastrophe to be averted but as a grim necessity. The COVID-19 pandemic, which killed more than 30 million people worldwide and has left over 400 million suffering from Long COVID, transformed this outlook into an openly fascist, eugenicist normalization of mass death which now finds expression in the response to Ebola.

The central lesson the financial oligarchy drew was not how to prevent the next pandemic but how to ensure that nothing, no quarantine or mobilization of resources or interruption of production, is permitted to disrupt the flow of profits.

No section of the existing order offers a way out. The entire bourgeois media conspires to present this as a remote and local event, severing it from the basic interconnection of global humanity and from the policies set in Washington and the other imperialist capitals that produced it.

The WHO, financially beholden to the imperialist powers, cannot so much as name the government whose cuts have crippled the global response. In his keynote address at the World Health Assembly this week, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus spoke of "aid cuts" in the passive voice and of a world "all in the same boat," as though there were no class divisions and no imperialism. Whatever the intentions of its officials, an institution that cannot identify the source of the catastrophe cannot be relied upon to halt it.

The measures required to halt this epidemic and prevent the next pandemic are neither mysterious nor beyond humanity's reach. They demand the immediate mobilization of the world's resources to implement an emergency public health program:

- The restoration and vast expansion of global disease surveillance, beginning with the programs the Trump administration destroyed.
- The deployment of medical personnel, laboratories and protective equipment to the affected region, under the direction of those who do the work.
- The rapid development of free and safe vaccines and treatments, to be distributed equally to all those in the affected region. The antibody therapy MBP134, demonstrated to be effective against the Bundibugyo virus and owned outright by the US government, must be released and trialed for Congolese and Ugandan patients—not stockpiled, as it now is, for "high-risk Americans" alone.
- The expropriation of the immense wealth amassed by the mining conglomerates and technology corporations that profit from the Congo, directed to building modern health infrastructure across the region.

There is no solution to this impasse within the framework of capitalism and the nation-state system. None of these measures will be carried out by the imperialist governments, the corporations or the institutions, such as the WHO which are subordinate to them. They can be fought for only by the international working class, mobilized independently of every capitalist party and the trade union bureaucracies, through its own organizations of struggle—rank-and-file committees linking workers across every border under the banner of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The defense of global society against pandemics and infectious diseases requires the rational, international organization of production and scientific research on the basis of human need, rather than private profit. This is possible only through the international unification of the working class in the struggle for world socialism. The fight against Ebola, like the fight against every disease of poverty and war, is inseparable from this revolutionary program.



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