

Government Indifference Compounds Ebola Disaster

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United Nations officials said Thursday that the UN trust fund for Ebola has only \$100,000 on hand, a fraction of the nearly \$1 billion the world body says is needed to contain the spread of the deadly virus. While the UN fund has received pledges of about \$20 million from various governments, it has received only \$100,000 in actual cash deposits, and that from only one country, Colombia.

The failure of the US, Western Europe and other wealthier nations to provide needed resources to confront the Ebola outbreak is indicative of governmental indifference, as the crisis intensifies in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone and cases are diagnosed outside West Africa. While donor countries have given about \$376 million in cash and non-cash contributions to other UN programs, the trust fund itself—a flexible cash resource vital to fighting Ebola—remains scandalously underfunded.

The World Health Organization (WHO) warned that as many as 10,000 new cases of Ebola a week could develop in the three hardest-hit West African countries by December 1. At a news conference Tuesday, WHO Assistant Director-General Bruce Aylward said the death toll now exceeds 4,400, with more than 8,900 confirmed cases since March.

Aylward said that while there were fewer cases in some of the worst affected areas, there were troubling signs that new areas of West Africa were reporting cases. There are also an increasing number of Ebola cases in the capital cities of the three countries most severely hit. The outbreak continues to wreak economic havoc on the region.

Food prices have risen by an average of 24 percent across Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia, with some families forced to reduce their intake to one meal a day, the World Food Program reported Friday. In Monrovia, the Liberian capital, prices of the main staple foods, Cassava and imported rice, have risen by 30 percent.

Food producing regions in the three countries have some of the highest infection rates, and hundreds of farmers have died. Quarantines and restricted movement of the population—introduced by government authorities to contain the virus—have led to food scarcity and panic buying, further pushing up prices.

Supplies vital to fight the spread of the hemorrhagic fever are in woefully short supply. In a grim statement, the health ministry in Liberia reported that in the next six months it will need more than 85,000 body bags, which are crucial in preventing the spread of the virus, but it has less than 5,000 on hand. The country also has a severe shortage of other vital supplies, including protective suits, facemasks, gloves and goggles.

The governmental response to this dire situation in West Africa—and reports of a handful of

new cases in Senegal, Nigeria, Spain and the US—has been particularly reprehensible in the US. The Obama administration is not making available the billions of dollars needed to provide human resources and supplies to the disease-ravaged region. Rather, it has seized on the humanitarian crisis as an opportunity to order the dispatch of active-duty troops to Liberia to secure a base for its African Command (AFRICOM).

On Thursday, Obama issued an executive order allowing the Pentagon to call up Reserve and National Guard troops to be sent to West Africa “to augment the active Armed Forces of the United States for the effective conduct of Operation United Assistance, which is providing support to civilian-led humanitarian assistance.”

The White House has come under increasing criticism over the authorities’ response to the first three cases of Ebola in the US. Thomas Eric Duncan, a Liberian, died October 6 at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas, Texas. He was initially released from the hospital despite having a fever and other symptoms and telling staff he had recently arrived from West Africa.

Two nurses who treated Duncan, Nina Pham and Amber Vinson, have been diagnosed with Ebola and have now been transferred to two of the nation’s four state-of-the-art Ebola treatment centers. Nurses at Texas Health Presbyterian have come forward to criticize the unpreparedness of hospital authorities to treat Ebola patients, including lack of staff training, protective suits that left nurses’ necks exposed, and reckless handling of contagious bodily fluid waste.

Before being diagnosed, Vinson contacted the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), reporting an elevated fever, and was nevertheless given the go-ahead to board a commercial airline flight. People on that flight, and others on subsequent flights on the same aircraft, may have been exposed to Ebola. Relatives of Vinson and some of those on these flights have now been placed in voluntary 21-day quarantine.

On Friday, another Texas Health Presbyterian worker, who reportedly processed Duncan’s lab specimens, was quarantined in a cabin aboard a cruise ship in the Caribbean on the recommendation of the CDC. The ship can carry 3,690 passengers and 1,367 crew members. Mexico and Belize refused to allow the ship to dock and it is returning to the US.

Facing mounting criticism over his administration’s incompetent and negligent response to the virus outbreak, President Obama on Friday named Ron Klain to serve as an “Ebola czar,” in charge of coordinating the government’s anti-Ebola efforts. The choice of Klain highlights the cynical and politically-driven concerns that dominate the administration’s actions in regard to the Ebola crisis.

Klain has no experience in health care or medical science. He is a Democratic Party insider who previously served as Vice President Joseph Biden’s chief of staff. He also served as chief of staff to Al Gore during the Florida ballot recount in the 2000 presidential election, when the former vice president acceded to the decision of the US Supreme Court to halt the recount and hand the presidency to George W. Bush.

The appointment of Klain confirms that Obama’s actions are driven not by what is needed to protect the population, either in the US or Africa, but rather by a desire to cover up the criminally negligent role of government agencies such as the CDC and of hospital officials, and limit the political damage to his administration.

With the mid-term elections less than three weeks away, the White House hopes the token appointment will prevent the Ebola crisis from becoming a significant issue on Election Day. Obama is coming under pressure from leading Republicans, including House Speaker John Boehner and Texas Governor Rick Perry, to impose a ban on travel from West Africa.

Leading health experts, including CDC Director Thomas Frieden, warn that such an action would lead to the economic collapse of West African nations stricken by the disease, worsening the epidemic and making its global spread more, rather than less, likely.

Obama said Friday he supports present airport screening measures but is not “philosophically opposed” to a travel ban. Federal Aviation Administration head Michael Huerta told reporters Thursday that the government was assessing whether to issue a travel ban “on a day-to-day basis.”

A serious response to the Ebola crisis requires taking control of the effort out of the hands of corporate-dominated governments. What is needed is a massive, coordinated effort mobilizing an international team of doctors, scientists and health care professionals equipped with whatever supplies and resources are required—at whatever cost—to save as many people as possible in the disease-stricken nations and prevent an outbreak on a global scale.

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