NEWS

US plans to deploy 3000 army personnel to tackle Ebola in west Africa

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The United States will deploy 3000 army personnel in a major effort to combat the Ebola outbreak in west Africa, President Barack Obama said on 16 September.

“Faced with this outbreak, the world is looking to us—the United States—and it’s a responsibility that we embrace,” Obama said at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, where he had attended briefings on the situation. He added, “We’re prepared to take leadership on this to provide the kind of capabilities that only America has and to mobilize the world in ways that only America can do.”

The epidemic in west Africa was “spiraling out of control,” Obama warned, adding, “Today, thousands of people in west Africa are infected. That number could rapidly grow to tens of thousands. And if the outbreak is not stopped now, we could be looking at hundreds of thousands of people infected, with profound political and economic and security implications for all of us.” Nearly 5000 people have so far become ill with the infection, and more than 2400 people have died since the outbreak began.

Under the plan announced by the White House, the US Africa Command will set up—at the request of the Liberian government—headquarters in Monrovia, the country’s capital. It will coordinate US military operations in the region and activities with other US government and international relief efforts in the affected nations—Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Senegal. The effort will be under the command of Darryl Williams, commander of the US army forces in Africa.

The command will establish a staging base in Senegal to expedite the transport and distribution of equipment, supplies, and personnel, and its engineers will build Ebola treatment units in affected areas. The US government will recruit and organize medical personnel to staff the new units. In addition, the command will set up a site to train as many as 500 healthcare workers a week to provide direct medical care to Ebola patients safely.

The US currently has more than 100 specialists in the affected region from such agencies as the Department of State, the

Department of Health and Human Services, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The US Public Health Service Commissioned Corps is preparing to deploy 65 of its officers to staff a field deployable hospital, which is being set up by the US Department of Defense in Liberia to care for healthcare workers who become ill.

To halt the spread of Ebola in communities, USAID will work with Unicef and other partners to provide households with information, training, and protection kits to prevent contagion. The initial effort will target the 400 000 most vulnerable households in Liberia and then be scaled up to cover the whole region.

To help cover the costs of the initiatives, the Department of Defense has requested \$500m (£307m; €388m) from its overseas contingency operation funds for humanitarian assistance. The US has already spent more than \$100m in the affected region on relief efforts, and USAID has announced that it will supply as much as \$75m in additional funding to increase the number of Ebola units, to airlift in additional medical and emergency supplies, and to support United Nations and World Health Organization activities.

Obama said that the overall US response would have four goals in mind: to control the outbreak; to tackle the ripple effects in global economies and communities to prevent a truly massive humanitarian disaster; to coordinate a broader global response; and to urgently build up a public health system in the affected countries for the future. He said, “The epidemic is going to get worse before it gets better, but right now, the world still has an opportunity to save countless lives. Right now, the world has a responsibility to act, to step up, and to do more.”

Margaret Chan, WHO director general, said in a statement, “This massive ramp-up of support from the United States is precisely the kind of transformational change we need to get a grip on the outbreak and begin to turn it around.”

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