

## Emergencies preparedness, response

### A fast-moving Ebola epidemic full of tragic surprises

The first time the Ebola virus has hit large cities and urban slums

Ebola at 6 months

The Ebola epidemic that is ravaging parts of West Africa is a fast-moving event with many unprecedented dimensions. This is the largest, most severe and most complex Ebola epidemic in the nearly four-decade history of the disease. The number of cases and deaths to date far exceeds those from all past outbreaks combined. The number of surprises delivered by the epidemic is likewise unprecedented. It is large and tragic.

Prior to the current epidemic, the Ebola virus had never before entered a capital city with more than just a handful of cases. All capital cities in the three hardest-hit countries have experienced large and explosive outbreaks.

The virus never before entered a community like West Point, in Monrovia, Liberia. West Point is West Africa's largest and most notorious slum: more than 70 000 people crowded together on a peninsula, with no running water, sanitation or garbage collection. The number of Ebola deaths in that slum will likely never be known, as bodies have simply been thrown into the two nearby rivers.

The current outbreak marks the first time that the virus has spread to a new country via a symptomatic air traveller, as happened in Lagos, Nigeria, on 20 July.

The epidemiological pattern seen in Guinea is unusual. Just when the outbreak looks like it is coming under control, sudden and unexpected flare-ups occur, again giving the virus a new breath of life.

The "hidden caseload" phenomenon has never been seen before in any previous Ebola outbreak. As soon as a new treatment facility is opened, it immediately fills to overflowing with patients, many of whom were not previously identified.

#### Hitting Ebola health workers hard

Never before has the Ebola virus affected so many health care workers. In the typical past pattern, amplification of infections in a health care facility was the first signal of an outbreak. After Ebola was identified as the causative agent, protective measures were introduced and cases in

health care workers virtually ceased. In this outbreak, infections in health care workers account for nearly 8% of total reported cases – an astonishing figure for this virus.

The total number of health care workers affected at all outbreak sites, as at 16 September, is 318, of whom 151 have died. Prior to the start of the epidemic, the three hardest-hit countries had only one or two doctors to serve a population of nearly 100 000 people. Every single loss of a doctor or nurse diminishes response capacity significantly.

The current exponential increase in the number of cases is unique.

The duration of the outbreak is unique. Even the largest previous Ebola outbreaks generally ended within 2 to 5 months. In the current outbreak, the Ebola virus has been circulating for at least 9 months, with no early end to the outbreak in sight.

### **More misery for fragile economies**

The final – and perhaps most significant – surprise is the magnitude of negative consequences for the fragile economies of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, countries that had only just begun to recover from years of civil conflict. These consequences have translated into more misery and hardship for populations that are already deeply impoverished and have been further severely traumatized by the outbreak.

In these countries, the outbreak is taking a quantifiable toll on national revenues, continuity of business activities, inflation, and prices of goods and services, including critical health services and food, and levels of household income.

In many areas, hunger has become an even greater fear than the virus. For example, the fertile fields of Lofa County, once Liberia's breadbasket, now lie fallow. In that county alone, nearly 170 farmers and their family members have died from Ebola.

The Chief of the African Development Bank described the situation in stark terms. "Revenues are down. Foreign exchange levels are down. Markets are not functioning. Airlines and ships are not coming in. Development projects are being cancelled. And business people have pulled out."

Then, on 17 September, the World Bank quantified what is likely to happen. The Bank's economists estimate the medium-term impact could reduce outputs by 2.3 percentage points of GDP in Guinea, 11.7 percentage points in Liberia and 8.9 percentage points in Sierra Leone.

The Bank concluded that the Ebola outbreak could deal a potentially "catastrophic blow" to economies in the three countries.

Ground zero in Guinea: the outbreak smoulders – undetected – for more than 3 months

Liberia: misery and despair tempered by some good reasons for hope

Sierra Leone: a traditional healer and a funeral

Ebola in Nigeria and Senegal: stable – for the moment

Democratic Republic of Congo: "classic" Ebola in a country experiencing its seventh outbreak

A fast-moving Ebola epidemic full of tragic surprises

What this – the largest Ebola outbreak in history – tells the world

How the four biggest outbreaks since the start of this century shattered some long-standing myths

Ebola in West Africa: heading for catastrophe?

Acknowledgements

---

[Ebola virus disease website](#)