

# Africans in New York complain of Ebola stigma

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Members of the west African community in New York complained Wednesday that their children were being bullied at school and businesses were losing money because of hysteria over Ebola.

Panic has gripped many Americans since a Liberian citizen brought the killer virus into the country and died on October 8 of the disease in a Texas hospital.

Two nurses who treated him became infected, though recovered, and a US doctor who returned to New York from treating Ebola patients in Guinea was diagnosed with the virus last week.

In the face of public panic, some US states and the Pentagon have imposed quarantine rules for people returning from Ebola-afflicted countries, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The African Advisory Council (AAC), a community group in New York, called a news conference in the Bronx, home to one of the largest African communities in the United States, to demand better education to end the fear.

"I need my community to be safe but also to be protected," said congressman for the Bronx, Jose Serrano, likening the fear of Ebola to the ignorance and panic that once confronted the emergence of AIDS.

Last week, two Senegalese boys were called Ebola and assaulted at a

school in the Bronx so badly they had to go to hospital, community leaders said.

The boys had three weeks previously moved to New York to join their father, a cab driver who has lived in the United States for nearly 20 years.

Their father Ousmane Drame blamed the assault on "kids who know nothing," and said the incident stemmed from ignorance.

"What happened to your children is unacceptable, as New Yorkers, as Americans, as human beings," said Serrano.

US President Barack Obama and officials in New York have repeatedly sought to sow calm, hailing medical workers battling Ebola as heroic and stressing that Ebola cannot be contracted through casual contact.

But community members say pervasive ignorance and scare mongering in sections of the media are putting their children at risk and jeopardizing their livelihoods.

"We rebuke any stigmatization that goes with Ebola any stigmatization that's before our business community, any stigmatization that's against our kids in the school," said Charles Cooper, Bronx president of the AAC.

## **Serious problem**

Moussa Kourouma, a taxi driver from Guinea, said children from the community face a "serious problem." Bullying and parents out at work made it easy for them to drop out of school and drift onto the streets, he said.

As president of a Guinea community association, he said the family of a five-year-old boy, who tested negative for Ebola in New York on Monday, are too frightened to return to their home in the Bronx.

"They cannot come back to where they were living because the neighborhood over there doesn't want to receive them," he said.

Kourouma said immigrants from the three afflicted countries were scared to go to hospital when they were sick or admit their origin to customers.

One customer threatened to get out of his cab as soon as he discovered he was from Guinea, he said.

"If you say you're from Guinea or Liberia or Sierra Leone, nobody got time for you," he told the news conference. "We have a serious problem."

Stephanie Arthur, chair of the civil engagement committee of the AAC, told AFP that she had no precise number of incidents but said Ebola exacerbated bullying many African children already face because of their origin.

Neither was it just in New York. Children had also been harassed and called Ebola in Texas, she said.

"This greatly impacts our quality of life as Africans," she told reporters.

"I want to challenge the media, I want to challenge health professionals to accurately report how this virus is transmitted. This fear mongering hurts this community," she added.

According to the Immigration Policy Center, the African foreign-born

population in the United States doubled in size between 2000 and 2010.

Nearly half of African immigrants are naturalized US citizens, and the largest African communities are in California, New York, Texas, Maryland and Virginia.

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