

British-led scientists trial 15-minute Ebola test in Guinea

November 28 2014, by Sabine Wibaux



A scanning electron micrograph of Ebola virus budding from a cell (African green monkey kidney epithelial cell line). Credit: NIAID

British scientists announced trials on a 15-minute Ebola test in Guinea as French President Francois Hollande became the first Western leader to visit a country devastated by the epidemic.

The prototype is six times faster than current tests and aims to speed up

diagnosis, the London-based global research charity Wellcome Trust and Britain's Department for International Development (DFID) said in a statement.

"A reliable, 15-minute test that can confirm cases of Ebola would be a key tool for effective management of the Ebola outbreak, allowing patients to be identified, isolated and cared for as soon as possible," said Val Snewin of the Wellcome Trust.

She said the test was designed to be suitable for remote field hospitals where electricity and cold storage are often scarce.

The trials, to be led by researchers from Dakar's Pasteur Institute at an Ebola treatment centre in Conakry in the coming weeks, will come as a welcome boon in Guinea which has lost 1,200 people to Ebola.

The biggest Ebola epidemic on record has claimed around 5,700 lives in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone since the beginning of the year, according to the World Health Organization.

President Hollande pledged his support for Guinea after arriving in France's west African former colony on Friday.

He said he was bringing with him a message of solidarity to healthcare workers who "take risks to ensure the highest quality care", and a message of confidence, because "it was very important to tell the world that Guinea is still alive, still fighting".

He also wanted to call for vigilance, he said, because "the battle against Ebola isn't won".

'Very important sign

The visit is the first by a French president since 1999, and comes after France pledged 100 million euros (\$125 million) towards the fight against the epidemic in Guinea.

The money will help finance several care centres as well as 200 beds, some of which are reserved for health workers caring for the sick.

France has also pledged to set up two training centres for health workers, one in France and one in Guinea. In addition, French biotechnology companies will set up rapid diagnostic tests in Africa.

Hollande visited healthcare workers at Conakry's Donka hospital, which hosts the city's Doctors Without Borders Ebola treatment unit, alongside his Guinean counterpart Alpha Conde.

Before entering, both men followed the protocol of washing their hands and having their temperatures taken.

The French leader is also due to sign a cooperation agreement with Guinean authorities for the creation of a Pasteur Institute in Conakry by the end of 2016, the global medical research organisation said on Thursday.

"For the people of Guinea, the arrival of President Hollande is a very, very important sign," Conde said.

"If the president of a country as important as France can come to Guinea, that means anyone can come to Guinea."

Heightened tensions

The visit comes amid heightened tensions in Guinea over the government's handling of the Ebola crisis and criticism over curbs to

free speech.

Conde said on Wednesday the use of force was entirely justified in battling the deadly Ebola outbreak.

"There are still people who think Ebola is fiction," Conde told a news conference in a country where an eight-member Ebola education team was murdered by angry villagers in September.

"We have an agenda which is to finish with Ebola as soon as possible and in Guinea this is possible," he added.

"If people don't want to be treated we will use force because we won't allow the illness to spread despite all our efforts."

Press advocacy organisation Reporters Without Borders has voiced concern about the attacks on press freedom under the pretext of the fight against Ebola.

Meanwhile the Guinean opposition coalition this week denounced the lack of consultation by the government over its strategy for fighting Ebola.

Hollande travelled to the Senegalese capital Dakar later on Friday to take part in a summit of French-speaking leaders that is likely to be dominated by the Ebola crisis as well as the recent unrest in Burkina Faso.

Hollande told a cheering crowd in Conakry that he would "launch a new appeal for international mobilisation. But France must lead by example".

The Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies urged the international community to refrain from "complacency" despite signs

that the epidemic is stabilising in Guinea and Liberia.

"The progress made in the fight against Ebola must be regarded as confirmation that our collective approach is successful and encourage us to stay the course until the epidemic is really under control," said Elhadj As Sy, the head of the organisation.

In a separate development, Mali announced on Friday that it had, for the first time, successfully treated a patient with the virus.

"We announce the first case of treating a person with Ebola virus. This person was treated effectively," said Health minister Ousmane Kone at a press conference.

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