

Obama seeks \$6.2 billion for Ebola fight

November 5 2014, by Jim Kuhnenn



President Barack Obama pauses during a news conference in the East Room of the White House, on Wednesday, Nov. 5, 2014, in Washington. Obama spoke the day after midterm elections, in which his party suffered heavy losses and Republicans seized the Senate. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

President Barack Obama on Wednesday asked Congress for \$6.2 billion in emergency funds to confront Ebola at its source in West Africa and to secure the United States against any possible spread.

Of the total, \$2 billion would be apportioned to the United States

Agency for International Development and \$2.4 billion would go to the Department of Health and Human Services, the White House said. More than \$1.5 billion would be for a contingency fund to deal with any unanticipated developments like a flare-up in West Africa or a need to vaccinate U.S. health care workers.

The Ebola money is the first request from Obama in the aftermath of an election that ushered in a Republican-controlled Congress, which is being seen as a repudiation of the president. The Ebola crisis has received bipartisan attention amid concerns over the potential of the disease to spread into the United States.

The White House is asking for prompt action, meaning it wants approval during the current congressional session, while Democrats are still in control of the Senate. It wants the money on an "emergency" basis, meaning it should be added to the deficit. Republicans, if they agree the money is needed, may press for spending cuts elsewhere in the budget.

Republicans have been especially critical of the administration's domestic response, criticizing its coordination with states and questioning the security measures it has put in place. Still, less than a handful of cases have materialized in the United States. One patient who contracted the disease in Liberia died in Dallas, two nurses who treated him became infected but eventually recovered and one doctor who returned from West Africa where he was treating Ebola patients became sick and is now under care in a hospital in New York City.

The nearly \$2 billion for USAID and \$127 million for the Department of State would help carry out the U.S. anti-Ebola mission in West Africa. More than \$2.4 billion would go to HHS, but administration officials would not break down the request on the basis of what was to be used to fight the disease overseas and what was meant to boost defenses in the United States. The Pentagon would get about \$112

million.

The \$4.64 billion in immediate spending would be used to strengthen the public health system in the U.S., combat the epidemic in West Africa, and speed up the development and testing of vaccines and other therapies. The money also would be used to help vulnerable foreign countries detect and respond to the disease.

The administration would establish more than 50 Ebola treatment centers throughout the country, procure safety suits, and more strictly monitor travelers on their arrival in the U.S.

"My foremost priority is to protect the health and safety of Americans, and this request supports all necessary steps to fortify our domestic health system and prevent any outbreaks at home," Obama said in a letter to House Speaker John Boehner, a Republican. Boehner's office said appropriators would review the request.

In making its case for the request, Obama faces a challenge of reassuring the public that Ebola is a difficult disease to contract here in the United States while at the same time insisting that stopping the virus at its West Africa source remains an urgent priority.

The public's attention has waned since the federal government and the governors of New York and New Jersey clashed over quarantine guidelines for returning travelers from the afflicted region. Absent a new case in the U.S., the focus has turned back to Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, where the disease has cost nearly 5,000 lives.

Aiming to show he's still focused on the issue, Obama on Wednesday called U.S. health workers staffing a U.S. military-constructed Ebola treatment unit set to open its doors next week in Monrovia, Liberia, the White House said.

Separately, Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker on Wednesday addressed a forum in Atlanta of potential U.S. investors in sub-Saharan Africa to reassure them that international efforts were helping confine the disease. In an interview, she said she heard little Ebola-related apprehension about taking business to broader Africa.

"What I want to make sure is that American businesses are well aware of the opportunity and that they aren't dissuaded by misperception," she said.

Wednesday's request is in addition to steps the administration already has taken to attack the disease in Africa and to set up a defense in the U.S. Obama has authorized the Pentagon to deploy up to 4,000 service members to West Africa to build Ebola treatment units, a hospital for infected health care workers in the afflicted region and training for communities in how to conduct safe burials of victims.

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Citation: Obama seeks \$6.2 billion for Ebola fight (2014, November 5) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-11-obama-billion-ebola.html>

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