

EU's Ebola czar focused on medical boots on the ground

December 3 2014, by Catherine Boitard

Europe must send more medical boots to West Africa and help rebuild local health systems to help tackle the outbreak of Ebola, the EU's Ebola coordinator said in an interview.

Christos Stylianides told AFP this week that he was in touch with European capitals to do more to counter the disease in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Mali.

Sending "as quickly as possible ready and specialised medical personnel" and "launching the reconstruction of local [health systems](#)" was the main path of action for the European Union, he said.

But he stopped short of repeating a call by a European source last week to have 5,000 doctors on stand-by, saying that the EU needed to be "flexible."

At a European level the mobilisation is "satisfactory but we must not relax our efforts" said Stylianides, who recently returned from a trip to the affected region with EU health commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis.

He is due to present an EU action plan at the end of December for treating the outbreak.

According to latest figures from the World Health Organization, the Ebola outbreak has claimed 6,070 lives out of more than 17,000 infections.

The EU as a whole has so far mobilised more than one billion euros (\$1.3 billion) for the fight against Ebola, including 373 million euros from the Commission, the EU's executive arm in Brussels.

"The first priority is doctors, nurses, hygienists, disease specialists," Stylianides said, adding that psychologists and social workers were also needed.

'Well trained volunteers'

Despite military deployments by Britain in Sierra Leone and France in Guinea, as well as the United States in Liberia, the aid effort has been slow to mobilise.

Stylianides said he and Vytenis Andriukaitis asked European capitals to speed up their work.

Volunteers have been increasingly difficult to find due to the risk of contagion for medical personnel, something that the EU has tried to address by stepping up procedures for evacuating health workers.

The EU's medical evacuation system is "fully operational" with four planes on stand-by in Luxembourg and the US and nine countries ready to treat repatriated staff, he said.

Brussels is counting on more help, and Sweden has already announced that it will send 42 caregivers, while Greece is readying its first team.

A cargo plane bearing aid from the Netherlands is also making its second trip to the area, he said.

"What we need is a pool of well-trained volunteers," he said.

The EU should also help with primary care in the affected areas, including maternal and child care, as well as treatment for other diseases such as malaria and AIDS.

The WHO said last week that Ebola-related deaths in west Africa will be higher than the number of people directly infected because of the disruption caused to already weak healthcare services.

"The health systems of the affected countries are in a critical state," he said. "If we fail in the medium term to rebuild them, we will have done nothing. We will have the same problem with other epidemics, for example cholera or malaria."

Stylianides said he hoped to have a further international conference on the issue in two or three months.

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Citation: EU's Ebola czar focused on medical boots on the ground (2014, December 3) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-12-eu-ebola-czar-focused-medical.html>

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