

Ebola reveals shortcomings of African solidarity

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As Africa's leaders meet in Ethiopia to discuss the Ebola crisis, expectations of firm action will be tempered by criticism over the continent's poor record in the early stages of the epidemic.

The outbreak is a priority on the agenda of the 54-nation African Union (AU) summit in Addis Ababa on Saturday, yet the bloc is still smarting from criticism that it reacted too slowly to the outbreak.

Health workers and cash have flooded in from the United States, Britain and even Cuba as part of a UN-led surge to battle an epidemic which has seen nearly 9,000 deaths in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone.

Yet it was only in September—10 months after the virus emerged and a month after it was declared a "health emergency of international concern"—that the AU held an emergency summit.

The three hardest-hit nations have expressed disappointment that their continental neighbours seemed initially to be much quicker to shut borders and ban flights than to deploy resources.

Sierra Leone President Ernest Bai Koroma hinted at his disillusionment in August when he greeted a \$500,000 donation from Gambia with an ill-disguised dig at his other African neighbours.

"In moments like this, we will remember our friends including those that are rallying round us and those that show true spirit of African

solidarity," he said.

He added that "we expect African countries and organisations including ECOWAS and the African Union to rally round and show solidarity which the Gambian president has demonstrated".

'Un-African travel bans'

A week earlier Ibrahim Ben Kargbo, a senior official, had expressed "shock" that South Africa had donated a mobile testing laboratory on one hand while banning Sierra Leoneans on the other.

The hurt was shared in Liberia where Musa Bility, head of the national football association, told AFP in August that travel bans imposed by several neighbours were "un-African".

Nelson Mandela's widow Graca Machel was more explicit when she blasted African leaders in November for an "inadequate" response to Ebola which demonstrated a lack of regard for human life.

The AU itself has recognised its shortcomings. At the height of the epidemic, members had deployed just 100 volunteers to west Africa, a quarter of the number provided by Cuba alone.

"With the wisdom of hindsight, our responses at all levels—continental, global and national—were slow, and often knee-jerk reactions that did not always help the situation," the bloc's chairwoman Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma admitted at a meeting with the heads of the United Nations and World Bank on October 28.

Politicians and aid agencies have noted a better response since, however, with 800 of 1,000 volunteers pledged in October now in place.

Danger of complacency

In November, the AU set up a crisis fund alongside the African Development Bank and regional business leaders, with some \$28 million pledged.

AU leaders in Ethiopia are discussing the economic recovery of countries affected by Ebola, setting up a "solidarity fund" and planning a proposed African Centre for Disease Control.

The World Health Organization (WHO) said on Thursday laboratory-confirmed Ebola infections had dropped below 100 new cases a week for the first time in more than six months.

The WHO said it had shifted its efforts from slowing the spread to stamping it out completely.

Meanwhile Guinea's President Alpha Conde has warned that the retreat of the virus has brought with it the danger of complacency.

"We have to see how to compensate for the damage that Ebola has inflicted on our economy and our finances," he told AFP last week on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, which brings together 2,500 of the world's most influential business and political leaders.

He called on the International Monetary Fund, which is owed \$480 million (\$557 million) by the Ebola-hit nations, to forgive the debt, a request which has been backed in part by the United States, IMF's largest shareholder.

"The consequences are extremely serious for our economy. Business executives no longer come to our country," he said.

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