

Civilians ready to take over Ebola fight: US army

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The head of the United States army in Africa expressed confidence Thursday that civilians could take over the battle to eradicate Ebola as Washington prepared to scale down its military force fighting the epidemic.

The US force reached 2,800 troops as the epidemic peaked but is due to withdraw over the coming weeks, leaving no more than 100 soldiers in the region by the end of April.

"We went into the process trying to work ourselves out of a job," USARAF commander Major General Darryl Williams told reporters at the end of a four-day conference of African army chiefs in the Senegalese capital Dakar.

"We were always looking at handing it over to civilian authorities."

The forces, most of whom were stationed in Liberia, constructed Ebola treatment units, trained health workers, provided logistical support for aid agencies and set up labs to test blood samples.

President Barack Obama said on Wednesday the mission would give way to a civilian-led drive to "extinguish" the deadly virus, as he ordered home American troops.

Guinea and its neighbours Sierra Leone and Liberia have registered around 9,000 deaths since the epidemic flared up in December 2013.

After months of decline, the World Health Organization said on Wednesday the number of new cases had risen for the second week running, including a "sharp increase" in Guinea.

The United Nations has played down the impact of the US troop withdrawal, saying 10,000 American civilians are engaged in the three hardest-hit nations.

Rapid reaction force

Williams, who led a task force in Monrovia to set up the mission in September, said conditions on the ground were now "right to transition to civilian control".

He said the welcome received by US troops in Liberia had been "absolutely overwhelming—very warm. The people of Liberia are very strong and I ultimately feel like that is what is making the difference."

Williams was addressing the media at the end of a conference bringing together top American military brass and the heads of 36 African armies or their representatives which opened in Senegal on Monday.

The event was co-hosted by the Senegalese military and USARAF, which has been promoting security across the continent since 1955, as well as providing crisis response, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance.

The meeting came amid heightened concerns over conflict across the continent, with intensified Boko Haram bloodshed delaying elections in Nigeria, the Central African Republic struggling to recover from a coup and ethnic violence raging in South Sudan.

Senegalese army chief Cheikh Gueye said an African rapid reaction

force to deal with crises across the continent, which has been in the planning stage for months, would be organised into four sections, for western, eastern, southern and northern Africa.

The force was set up in principle at an African Union summit last year and is seen as a step towards a permanent standby peacekeeping force.

Nine nations promised at an AU summit in January to send soldiers to the force, commission chief Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma confirmed, without giving further details or a timetable for its implementation.

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