

UN downplays US pullout of Ebola mission

February 11 2015

The US plan to pull troops out of West Africa will not leave a hole in the battle against Ebola, UN coordinator David Nabarro said Wednesday, but much work remains to get to zero cases.

The Pentagon announced that nearly all of the 1,300 troops currently in West Africa would return home by April 30 even though it remains unlikely that the region will be declared Ebola-free by then.

"This departure does not leave a hole," Nabarro told AFP at UN headquarters.

He stressed that 10,000 American civilians are engaged in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone to fight the Ebola outbreak that has left about 9,000 dead.

"I hope that they will continue to be engaged and to provide cash and material and elements until the thing is finished," Nabarro said.

The United States has set up a reserve force from the National Guard that could return to West Africa quickly to deal with an upsurge, said Nabarro.

After a drop in the number of new cases fueled hope that the Ebola crisis was waning, a flareup in late January revived fears that the health emergency was far from over.

While the focus of the anti-Ebola battle has shifted from treatment to

containing outbreaks, Nabarro said rebuilding health systems and getting economies back on the road to recovery was also part of the task at hand.

"The whole job will take this year," he said.

"I am hopeful that we will see zero (cases) in Liberia quickly... But Liberia is not going to be safe until Guinea and Sierra Leone are also free. I am truly hopeful that we will see that this year," he said.

The United States sent 2,800 troops at its peak to help build treatment centers and set up and command and logistics center in Liberia that has since been taken over by the United Nations.

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Citation: UN downplays US pullout of Ebola mission (2015, February 11) retrieved 4 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-02-downplays-pullout-ebola-mission.html>

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