

US wraps up Ebola military mission in Liberia

February 26 2015

The United States staged a military ceremony Thursday to end its five-month Ebola mission in Liberia, with the west African nation in recovery from the worst-ever outbreak of the virus.

A force that at one point reached 2,800 has been gradually scaled back since the epidemic began to recede, and the Pentagon has announced that "nearly all" troops will be gone by the end of April.

"The importance of the progress we see today means more than just the reduction in the number of new or suspected cases of Ebola," said mission commander Major General Gary Volesky.

"This progress is also about Liberians being able to get back to a normal way of life."

The 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) "cased its colours"—the ceremonial folding and stowing of the flag—in Monrovia, marking the end of the "Joint Forces Command United Assistance" mission.

The Pentagon says around 100 US troops are to remain in the region to strengthen "disease preparedness and surveillance capacity" of local governments.

Liberia, once the country worst hit by Ebola, has registered 4,037 of around 9,600 deaths in the epidemic, which began in Guinea in December 2013.

At its height in the final four months of last year, Liberia and Sierra Leone were recording between 300 and 550 confirmed, suspect and probable cases a week.

Tide turning

The latest data from the World Health Organization shows a total of fewer than 400 new cases across the three countries in the three weeks to Sunday.

But while cases continue to arise from unknown chains of transmission in Guinea and infection remains widespread in Sierra Leone, the recovery is much further advanced in Liberia.

Authorities in Monrovia reported just one new confirmed case nationwide in the week to Sunday—a registered contact associated with a known chain of transmission in the capital.

Government spokesman Isaac Jackson said the number of patients being treated in Liberia's 19 Ebola treatment centres had dropped to as low as two last week.

"This is an indication that Liberia is making significant progress in the fight against Ebola," he told state radio.

When an American who travelled to Liberia died from the virus last year, public fears spiked in the US, and Washington officials scrambled to take measures to prevent any possible outbreak.

Around \$2.5 billion has been allocated by the US government to the Ebola response, while Washington has played a supportive role in securing IMF and World Bank funding.

President Barack Obama approved plans in September for more than 3,000 troops to head to Liberia and Senegal.

But the full contingent never had to be ordered in as the tide began to turn in the effort to contain the virus.

Volesky said the mission was originally expected to last up to 18 months, rotating thousands of troops.

US aid 'crucial'

The US forces, the vast majority of whom were stationed in Liberia, constructed Ebola treatment units, trained 1,500 health workers, provided logistical support for aid agencies and set up labs to test blood samples.

Although US troops in Liberia and Senegal had no contact with patients, the Pentagon has placed all military personnel returning from west Africa in quarantine as a precaution.

Officials so far have not detected the virus in any US soldier that worked in the region.

The end of the mission comes with Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf visiting Washington to thank the American people for their contribution to Liberia's recovery.

She told the government aid agency USAID American help had been "crucial, providing the much-needed support that enabled our people in the towns, villages and communities who were the victims to take ownership of the fight", according to a statement on the Liberian presidency's website.

"The US has been a great partner," it quoted her as saying.

Sirleaf is due to meet Obama at the White House on Friday to discuss the Ebola response and the gruelling task of economic recovery.

Earlier this month, schools in Liberia restarted lessons as Sirleaf vowed to eradicate the disease by mid-April.

Obama recently backed that goal and heralded a new phase in the fight against Ebola, one focused on extinguishing rather than containing the disease.

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