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Liberian Minister calls for help to tackle Ebola

The Ebola epidemic has pushed already weak healthcare systems into intensive care as Liberian minister Axel Addy appeals for international help to tackle the spread of the disease

Liberia today issued a direct appeal to the international community to help it deal with the outbreak of Ebola as it revealed that the number of people affected by the disease had broken the 3,000 barrier.

Axel Addy, Liberia's Minister of Commerce and Industry, warned that the numbers succumbing to the epidemic could "explode beyond control".

Crippling disease

"We have a crisis on our hands," he said in a briefing at the [International Growth Centre's Growth Week](#) conference in London, "My briefing this morning is that there are about 3,000 cases. We are in a race against time. Our entire health sector has been crippled by this new invasion."

He thanked international organisations such as the World Health Organisation, European Union and the African Union and individual countries such as the US, UK and China for the assistance they have provided.

But he warned: "This is something that we have never experienced in our history and the challenge of dealing with the response is something that is being assessed and requires the full commitment of the international community to move very fast."

Asked when he wanted to see more international help, Mr Addy replied that the country needed it "like yesterday". "The disease is spreading very fast and we need containment centres set up quickly, we need treatment centres done and we need the extraction [of bodies] very quickly," he said.

"This is an incident where we don't have the time and we need everyone to move as quickly as possible to make sure those resources are available. This is a priority for us and we will use and mobilise all resources the government has but we need help."

Human kindness

According to Mr Addy the country does not have enough ambulances to transport the sick to monitoring and health

centres nor enough burial teams to cope with a death toll that had risen to 1,328 by the end of last week.

“My call to action today is to appeal to all of us that this is a menace and an epidemic that thrives on human kindness and it can be beaten by human kindness from the international community,” he said.

In a moving passage, Mr Addy said Liberia’s traditional culture made it hard for people not to care for members of their family who had fallen ill in their homes. “We see that mothers are dying and fathers who care for them are dying and leaving orphans,” he said.

“Children are dying and parents who care for them are dying and the parents who care for them are also dying. It is unnatural in our society not to care. All these embedded traditions serve as a superhighway for the spread of this disease.”

Last week the [United Nations warned](#) that the number of Ebola cases in West Africa could start doubling every three weeks and could end up costing nearly \$1 billion to contain the crisis. “The commitments are coming but it takes a long time to operationalise those commitments. We need urgent assistance now,” Mr Addy said.

He warned that unless the epidemic was controlled soon it could spread to the rest of Africa “and beyond”. The disease, which was officially recognised in March, has already affected people in Nigeria and Senegal. Mr Addy talked about as many as 500,000 people being affected.

Economic impact

Ebola has had a devastating impact on the economies of Liberia and the other affected countries of Sierra Leone and Guinea. Liberia’s economy is forecast to grow just 2.5% this year down from earlier forecasts of 6%. In the worst case scenario of an acceleration of the epidemic it would plunge into a sharp recession next year as the economy shrank by almost 5%.

Mr Addy said that the mining sector was particularly badly affected as the main operators had had to slow down their operations after many of their expatriate technical staff had left the country.

The outbreak has seriously affected economic activities throughout Liberia including domestic food production, mining activities, the hospitality industry and transport services.

This has resulted in a major shortfall of in tax revenues. Liberia has estimated the fiscal impact at \$92 million or 4.7% of GDP. Inflation and food prices are rising in response to shortages, panic buying, and speculation.

Professor Eric Werker, the Country Director for Liberia at the IGC, which has been engaged in the country since 2011, said the centre had “deep concerns” for the impact of Ebola on Liberia’s society and economy.

Since the outbreak the IGC has embarked on a number of

projects to assist the government. “We have begun to gather data immediately to help out colleagues in government with their response,” he said.

He said that in the wake of signs of rising commodity prices, IGC researchers had pulled together data on prices and numbers of traders for 150 markets. “If there are few traders we can expect higher prices which would magnify the existing crisis,” he said. “They did find that prices had gone up and the number of traders had gone down.”

They have launched a project in Liberia and Sierra Leone using mobile phones to call households to get some household survey data on how families are responding. “We are maintaining a dialogue with our colleagues in government and to continue to provide economic advice and research.”