News

Confirmed Ebola Cases Continue to Drop in West Africa

(Prepared by the Section Editor)—Many news articles are projecting success in eliminating Ebola in West Africa. Numbers vary according to source, but the weekly average of new confirmed cases of Ebola in West Africa over the 3-week period ending 25 January 2015 compared with the weekly average ending 18 January 2015 has dropped from 45 to 20–30 in Guinea, 8 to 7 in Liberia, and 183 to 77–122 in Sierra Leone, respectively. The weekly numbers were 115, 30, and 326, respectively, as of 28 December 2014.

However, as long as there are new cases, there is the potential for the forest fire to reemerge from the embers or, as stated by that famous philosopher, Yogi Berra, “It ain’t over till it’s over.”

Anger, Mistrust in Guinea Villages Hinders Battle to Beat Ebola

23 January 2015 (Reuters [Saliou Samb])—Angry residents are blocking access for health workers to dozens of remote villages in Guinea.

Like its West African neighbors Liberia and Sierra Leone—the worst-affected nations—Guinea has recorded a sharp fall in infections in recent weeks, fueling hope that the tide has turned against the epidemic.

But with some people still denying the disease exists, experts say it could prove difficult to trace those who had been in contact with the infected and to change traditional behavior such as burial rituals involving touching the dead.

In a sign of the resistance and distrust, medical kits sent by the government to schoolchildren were destroyed by villagers in Ourekaba, southern Guinea. Fode Tass Sylla, spokesman for the Guinean national committee for the fight against Ebola, said that locals thought the kits had been sent to contaminate the children.

Two security officials who arrived to investigate reports of a secret Ebola burial were lynched last week by a crowd in Sinkine, about 100 km from the capital, Conakry.

While in Sierra Leone, some communities have been reluctant to change their behavior, the problem in Guinea appears more acute, with health workers still being denied access altogether.

While the United States deployed marines to Liberia to help build Ebola treatment units and Britain sent 800 troops to its former colony Sierra Leone to help battle the outbreak, France has not extended similar military aid to Guinea.

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Ebola Likely to Persist in 2015 as Communities Resist Aid: Red Cross

30 January 2015 (Reuters [Stephanie Nebey])—The Ebola virus is “flaring up” in new areas in the region, said Birte Hald, who leads the Ebola coordination and support unit of the Red Cross.

“We are seeing that in places like Sierra Leone and especially in Guinea that it is flaring up in new districts all the time, with small new chains of transmission,” said Hald.

The Red Cross still has “no access” to some communities in Guinea, Hald said.

Some 27 subprefectures in Guinea reported at least 1 security incident or other form of refusal to cooperate in the week to January 21. Two districts in Liberia and 4 in Sierra Leone reported at least 1 similar incident, World Health Organization spokeswoman Fadela Chaib said.

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On Ebola Front Line, First Glimpse of End to Epidemic

21 January 2015 (Reuters [Emma Farge and Umaru Fofana])—In Sierra Leone, at the front line of the Ebola epidemic, the tide seems to be turning against the disease.

A military-style operation to fight the outbreak in Sierra Leone—the worst-affected country—has helped to dramatically reduce new cases, in what health officials say is a major step towards defeating Ebola.

Since it was launched about 1 month ago, the drive has doubled the number of ambulances for patients in the densely populated west of a country where more than 3000 people have died.

Police halt vehicles at checkpoints in the tumble-down streets to check temperatures, while posters proclaim in the local Krio language: “Togeda we go stop Ebol.”

Aid workers also report success in changing behavior in rural areas, notably discouraging people from burial rituals involving direct contact with the dead.

As a result, transmission of the hemorrhagic fever has slowed sharply in the West African country. President Ernest Bai Koroma says he believes his government—helped by the nearly 800 British soldiers and more than $450 million in foreign aid—can stamp out Sierra Leone’s last case by the end of March.

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Scientists Ask if Ebola Immunizes as Well as Kills

27 January 2015 (Reuters [Kate Kelland and Emma Farge])—A recent sharp drop in new Ebola infections in West Africa is prompting scientists to wonder whether the virus may be silently immunizing some people at the same time as killing their neighbors.

“Asymptomatic” Ebola cases—in which someone is exposed to the virus, develops antibodies, but doesn’t get sick or suffer symptoms—are hotly disputed among scientists, with some saying their existence is little more than a pipe dream.

Yet if, as some studies suggest, such cases do occur in epidemics of the deadly disease, they may be a key factor in ending outbreaks more swiftly by giving secret protection to those lucky enough to be able to combat the infection.

Herd immunity is a feature of many infectious diseases and can, in some cases, dampen an outbreak if enough people get asymptomatic, or “subclinical” cases and acquire protective antibodies. After a while, the virus—be it flu, measles, or polio—can’t find nonimmune people to be its hosts.

But some specialists with wide experience of disease outbreaks are highly skeptical about whether this phenomenon happens in Ebola, or whether it could affect an epidemic.

Others are more hopeful and are urging researchers in West Africa to seek out and test possible asymptomatic cases with a view to using the secrets of their silent immunity.

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Editorial comment. This is an important question, but there is little evidence for asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic disease except in a very few patients.

After Ebola, Flu and Drug Resistance Top Pandemic Threats

23 January 2015 (Reuters [Ben Hirschler])—The worst-ever Ebola epidemic is waning, but it has hammered home the message that the world needs a better detective system for emerging diseases.

One thing is certain: More epidemics are coming and dense urban living, coupled with modern travel, will accelerate future infectious disease outbreaks.

It is not the first time a disease has been able to fester under the radar in Africa. HIV was missed for decades before finally bursting onto the world stage after it took hold in the United States.

Asymptomatic flu cases may be a key factor in ending outbreaks more swiftly, giving secret protection to those lucky enough to be able to combat the infection.

Herd immunity is a feature of many infectious diseases and can, in some cases, dampen an outbreak if enough people get asymptomatic, or “subclinical” cases and acquire protective antibodies. After a while, the virus—be it flu, measles, or polio—can’t find nonimmune people to be its hosts.

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Editorial comment. As emphasized by the One Health concept, many of the recent new diseases we have seen (eg, severe acute respiratory syndrome, Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus, avian influenza), as well as yet unrecognized diseases, have their origins in the animal kingdom. Identifying and preparing for new epidemics is key. An example of such an effort is the PREDICT project of the US Agency for International Development, which seeks to identify new emerging infectious diseases that could become a threat to human health with a focus the wildlife most likely to carry zoonotic diseases (eg, bats, rodents, and non-human primates). Since 2009, PREDICT has detected a total of 820 unique new viruses in wild animals and humans in regions where diseases are most likely to emerge.

Obama to Propose Sharp Increase in Antibiotic Funding

27 January 2015 (Reuters [Peter Cooney])—President Barack Obama’s fiscal 2016 budget request will propose nearly doubling federal funding to some $1.2 billion for the fight against antibiotic-resistant bacteria, the White House said.

That figure includes $650 million to fund efforts by the National Institutes of Health and Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority to sharply expand investments in the development of antibacterial diagnostics and research.

A further $47 million would help fund Food and Drug Administration evaluation of new antibacterial drugs for patient treatments.

In addition, funding would increase at the departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense to $85 million and $75 million, respectively, to address issues tied to antibiotic resistance in healthcare settings. Department of Agriculture funding for antibiotic research and surveillance would nearly quadruple to $77 million.

Obama signed an executive order last September launching federal efforts to combat the rise in antibiotic-resistance bacteria.

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