

Global Ebola Response Coalition Meeting
26 December 2014
Issues Discussed and Next Steps

The eleventh meeting of the Global Ebola Response Coalition Core Group took place on 26 December. The main points covered in the meeting follow.

2. The meeting started with an update on the **latest epidemiological situation**. The number of reported cases is now 19,796 in total, with the number of reported deaths now at 7,757. Overall the epidemic is slowing, with a flattening of the curve across the region. But it is becoming more geographically dispersed with some reinfection in areas (e.g. in Liberia) where there had been periods of time with no new cases. There remains highly uneven progress, both between and within the countries. In Sierra Leone we have now seen a few weeks of decreasing case numbers. The main challenges remain in the Western Area, particularly around Port Loko. The Western Area Surge has not produced the expected numbers of new cases: it looks as though less than 30% were being missed. Results suggest that the response is getting on top of the outbreak in much of Sierra Leone but much more needs to be done to ensure that (a) assets are well used and (b) there is capability to respond to new hotspots as soon as they appear. Additional challenges include the shortages of food and other basic needs in areas where people's movements have been restricted, and the continuing lack of accessible primary health care for all people. In Liberia, the downward trajectory in case numbers is continuing. With less than 100 new cases each week for the last two weeks. The area around Monrovia is still providing the main locus for new cases, with index cases elsewhere originating from this area. There are worries in Nimba county, where cross-border importation of cases has been reported. This shows the need for responses to be decentralized, focused and rapid. There is increasing concern about the situation in Guinea, with infections in twice as many prefectures now as there were two months ago. Movement of contacts and reinfections of areas thought to be Ebola-free, are increasing the challenge. The risk of spread to other West African countries remains high and if this happens it will stretch the response significantly. In Mali, it is now 4 weeks since the last confirmed case and all contacts from those cases have been cleared. However, a possible new case is under investigation in the Kouremale area.

3. In discussing **the response**, it is agreed that a differentiated response strategy is key to making progress. For the response to be as effective as possible, the entities working at District level must be really well coordinated, must align their working and must function in synergy. This calls for transparency, openness and trust among many different organizations. By and large this is happening, though there is always scope for more effective operational coordination and for coordinators who are respected by all the different groups involved – be they national and local government, NGO, donor, business or UN system actors. This meeting recognised the importance of ensuring better Infection Prevention and Control, especially in holding centres, and the need for disciplined case finding, surveillance and contact tracing. A zonal approach was necessary to manage more effectively the issues of cross border infections.

4 **Important challenges** to be kept in mind include: inadequate means to manage waste in ETUs and elsewhere; consistent and robust testing, contact tracing and surveillance; public health capacity being drawn to Ebola at the cost of other critical public health activities; the use of holding centres as care centres, without the former having the necessary skills to play that role; the reach of the response being constrained by issues of distance and available logistical assets; and the limited degree to which current awareness raising and social mobilisation activities are eliciting sufficient changes in behaviour – in a uniform way.

5 **Two important NGO reviews are planned:** one by NGOs in West Africa considering the effectiveness of coordination of the response; the other by the Disasters Emergency Committee from the UK specifically on Sierra Leone and focusing on non-Ebola activities. The Office of the Special Envoy (John Gordon) would be the Coalition's point of contact for this work. It is also noted the WHO Executive Board Special Session on Ebola is planned for 25 January, which is going to focus on lesson learning. The World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Davos January 2015 will also consider Ebola issues.

6. The Special Envoy offered some comments on the **UN Secretary General's recent visit to the Region**. All four affected countries plus Ghana were visited. The Secretary General was very impressed by what he saw: the way the collective response has risen to the challenge of Ebola and how the many different groups are working intensely and closely together to support the work of the affected country Governments. The Secretary General met five Presidents and found that they are all fully focused on the issues and challenges, on the need to ensure essential services are provided and on the importance of a well-planned, Government-led road to recovery. They are all worried about the extent to which their countries are isolated from the rest of the world.

7 The Secretary General spoke of how the response strategy is evolving into a second phase, with an emphasis on district-by-district implementation of actions that are tailored to need. Features of this will include: establishing a full range of *outbreak alert and response capacities*, matched to the pattern of the outbreak; timely and reliable *disease surveillance*; coordination of all responders for effective *case finding and contact tracing*, plus stronger *crisis management capacities* of Government and partners; as well as better *provision of essential services* to reduce the damage done to societies, economies, as well as livelihoods, health and food security.

8 There was much discussion during the Secretary General's visit about ways in which Government and partners could best work together to ensure an effective response. Suggestions by the Presidents (and their Ministers), as well as by donor and NGO representatives, included: (a) stronger coordination of responders at district level; (b) increased deployment of senior public health experts capable of organizing and supervising effective contact tracing, surveillance and response, (c) more community engagement, (d) flexible capacity for treatment of people with

Ebola; (e) accessible and reliable laboratory services. All asked for the UN system to work as effectively as possible under the leadership of national Ebola Crisis Managers and UN Resident Coordinators. All spoke of the need to focus on preparedness in neighbouring countries: “all are at risk as long as there is one person with Ebola in the region”.

9. There was a discussion on ongoing work on **resources for the response and the tracking of these resources**. The plan is to have an updated assessment of overall needs and requirement for the global Ebola response by 12 January. That will include activities to support preparedness, and to support essential services. It will not be looking at needs for longer term recovery. In addition, we have a clearer idea of the status of resources already available as part of the global Ebola response, and how those resources are being deployed. Further work will follow on the classification of the resources by strategic response area. This all represents work in progress and is being done with the support of many in the Coalition.

10. The need for **harmonized and consistent information** about the Ebola outbreak and response was highlighted. There is still interest from the media on Ebola. Collaboration amongst those responsible for communications remains strong, and this is resulting in greater alignment of messages. Establishing fresh and unified messages is a top priority. The Stocktake exercise being undertaken by the Ebola Information Centre, with support of many in the Coalition, is a helpful means to achieve that. It is important to recognise the quality and range of work underway within countries with strong national and international support. All are facing many different challenges: it is important that these are identified and discussed with a view to improving and enhancing the impact of our collective effort.

11. **In summary**, although we are seeing a reduction in the overall numbers of new cases within the Outbreak, the picture is one of increasing dispersion with as many as 50 “micro-outbreaks” in an area as large as the UK: each of these requires a tailored response and this calls for the provision and effective use of alert and response capacity at district, county and prefecture levels. Given that the distribution of Ebola disease is always changing due to people’s mobility and limited success of contact tracing efforts, big gaps in the response remain. There is clearly concern about the use of holding centres as places to provide treatment and care. There is continuing anxiety about unsafe burials as a prominent means of transmission and source of new infections. The scale of the challenge and the importance of moving rapidly to the locus of new outbreaks, means that effective coordination among all responders is critically important and needs continuous attention. The planned NGO reviews will be useful in informing the way forward. The UN system will be investing strongly in mechanisms for enhanced coordination. The UN’s work on resource flows is very important indeed given the importance that national governments give to transparency. The ongoing effort for effective dissemination of information - with a strong and unequivocal narrative - is vital.

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