

Global Ebola Response Coalition
8 May 2015
Issues Discussed and Next Steps

The twenty-eighth meeting of the Global Ebola Response Coalition Core Group took place on 8 May. The main points covered in the meeting follow.

Status of the outbreak

1. Participants discussed the status of the outbreak. The number of people newly diagnosed with Ebola in the seven days to 3 May is 18, as compared to 33 in the previous week. This represented a progress as the weekly total had remained constant at approximately 30 for the last four weeks.
2. The geographic spread of the virus further narrowed, with only three districts and prefectures reporting people newly infected with Ebola, as compared to eight in the previous week. These were Forécariah in Guinea, and Kambia and Western Area Urban in Sierra Leone. While this reduction is a positive development, it is necessary to have a broader view of the trends. In the last three weeks, 12 districts and prefectures had reported people newly infected with Ebola, so these places should be understood as places that could give rise to new chains of transmission.
3. Five out of nine people newly diagnosed with Ebola in Guinea had died in their communities; in Sierra Leone, this figure was three out of nine people. The proportion of people newly diagnosed with Ebola who come from known contact lists continues to be low (44% in Guinea and 22% in Sierra Leone). These less than optimal key indicators mean that there are transmission chains that are undetected and there is not full knowledge of the origin of the transmissions.
4. In considering how long it will to get to zero, the case of Liberia is instructive. It took four months to go from single-digit case numbers to the expected declaration of Liberia as Ebola-free on 9 May. At the time Liberia was getting to zero, the chains of transmission were well-known and the response efforts were operating during the dry season. Therefore, even assuming the best case scenario, response efforts can be expected to continue in Guinea and Sierra Leone for at least another four months.
5. The New England Journal of Medicine recently reported that an Ebola survivor suffered deterioration of vision and a persistence of the virus in his eye. The virus cleared over time and there was no evidence that it was present in his tears.

Status of the response

6. Liberia. Participants noted that even after being declared Ebola-free on 9 May, Liberia will remain engaged and vigilant, and continue to show solidarity with the other Ebola-affected countries. Liberian experts involved in the response will be invited to share their knowledge with their counterparts in Guinea and Sierra Leone.

7. Guinea. A multi-disciplinary, multi-agency team has been sent to Forécariah for the last 10 days to identify obstacles to getting to zero. These obstacles include distrust of responders and concerns that families will not be allowed to care for the sick and bury their dead. Consideration is given to building localized offices in Forécariah to get closer to the communities, continuing anthropological research, and deploying additional epidemiologists to improve contact tracing. IFRC is rapidly scaling up burial teams, as they have been tasked by the Guinean government to handle all burials, whether or not the deaths are Ebola-related.
8. Sierra Leone. The National Ebola Response Centre (NERC) and international partners have designed an action plan for Kambia and Western Area Urban. The NERC has visited Kambia in order to improve the confidence of the political leadership in the response. Measles immunization campaigns have also been undertaken in Sierra Leone.
9. The presidents of Guinea and Sierra Leone are planning to jointly launch a high-level social mobilization campaign. A door-to-door campaign in an area on the border of the two countries is expected to be initiated in mid-May.
10. The Islamic Development Bank (IBD) reported that it has mobilized USD 51 million for the Ebola response, including a USD 35 million donation from the late King of Saudi Arabia. The Bank emphasized the need to align with national plans and harmonize with partners. Its assistance has focused on providing training and improving schools and health facilities.

Rainy season

11. WFP noted that it had already expanded drainage facilities and storage capacities for food and non-food items in all three countries. With regard to transportation, it has deployed trucks and increased the capacity to maintain vehicles. Two helicopters have been deployed to each of the three countries, and the helicopters from Liberia can be redeployed to the other countries, if needed. Telecommunications equipment has been reinforced to withstand lightning and electrical outages. All partners were encouraged to implement their own arrangements to prepare for the rainy season, as well as to communicate their needs to the Logistics Cluster. The Logistics Cluster has circulated a rainy season toolkit list so that partners can obtain essential materials in advance. Finally, WFP emphasized the need to have realistic expectations about helicopter service during the rainy season, given that helicopters will be unable to fly in strong rains.
12. The rainy season will also pose programmatic challenges. As incidence of malaria and diarrhoea increase, the conditions that present themselves as Ebola will also increase and this will complicate the response. It will be necessary to take action to treat these non-Ebola diseases and ensure triage in hospitals.

Transitions

13. As the areas affected by active transmission are shrinking and large parts of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone are returning to normalcy, one important transition underway is the transition from the response to the early recovery. Early recovery is complicated and requires coordination and management. In the transition from response to early recovery it will be necessary to have a strong capacity that focuses exclusively on getting to zero while others work on recovery.

14. Many organizations, including UNMEER, are reconfiguring. This process of transition has to be very carefully managed, and will entail work for the Ebola crisis managers, the UN country teams, the national governments and the coordination mechanisms. OCHA will be playing a key role on information management, coordination and other elements.

Any other business

15. Participants requested more information about two ongoing evaluations – the independent assessment of the WHO response and the Secretary-General’s high-level panel. The first part of the WHO independent assessment is expected to be issued within days and will only reflect its meetings with international responders. The Secretariat of the Secretary-General’s high-level panel will be invited to provide an update to the GERC.

Summary

16. In summary, the following issues were highlighted:
- On the epidemiological developments, while the numbers are down, the challenges continue. With a number of districts and prefectures at risk, it is important to maintain focus and ensure continued surveillance, infection prevention and control, capacity for safe and dignified burials, sensitive community engagement, and support for survivors.
 - The IDB reported on the contributions that they have made to the response effort, making sure that schools and health centres are safer and more hygienic, aligning with national plans, and harmonizing with partners.
 - WFP is getting prepared for the rainy season and encouraging partners to do the same. The rainy season will also pose programmatic challenges, as incidence of malaria and diarrhoea increase.
 - As a number of organizations are undergoing internal transitions and it will be important that shifts are coordinated at the country level.
 - In future meetings, it is hoped that the GERC will be a platform for more partners to talk about their work on early recovery and to share information on the various assessment exercises, including the Secretary-General’s high level panel.