United Nations

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Under-Secretary-General Valerie Amos

Statement on the presentation of the Needs and Response Document on Ebola

Geneva, 16 September 2014

Ebola is a public health emergency. But it is much more than that.

Today we are launching an overview of needs and requirements as one element of the response to the Ebola outbreak.

It’s clear that if not dealt with effectively now, Ebola could become a major humanitarian crisis in countries currently affected. There are already significant regional implications. Liberia and Sierra Leone emerged from humanitarian crisis less than a decade ago; Guinea has been through a period of serious political instability. But these countries were building their economies and institutions. Now their capacity to deliver the necessities of daily life for their people is on the brink of collapse. The Ebola outbreak poses a serious threat to their post-conflict recovery.

That’s why we must act now, if we want to avoid greater humanitarian consequences in future.

First, we must prevent the complete collapse of health systems in the affected countries. Already, it’s estimated that more people have died from secondary aspects – from malaria, tuberculosis or in childbirth, or from chronic illnesses – than have died from Ebola. We have all seen stories of mothers in labour being turned away by hospital staff, who either have no capacity to help them, or fear infection. Vaccination coverage in Liberia had declined by 50 percent by July. Public health systems, which were already underdeveloped, are under terrible strain in the areas hardest hit by Ebola.

Second, the food security situation in some parts of the most affected countries is of great concern. The economic slowdown, disruption to markets and imposition of quarantine including roadblocks in some areas are reducing the availability of food and the purchasing power of households.

These are some of the poorest countries in the world. In Liberia, where 62 per cent of the population is classified as poor, and 48 per cent as extremely poor, any rise in prices could put hundreds of thousands of people at risk of food insecurity.

Third, support for water and sanitation services will be critical as the recent heavy rains have increased the risk of water-borne diseases and communities in quarantined areas will continue to have basic needs.
And we also need to bear in mind protection, as Ebola takes a particular toll on vulnerable groups, including women and children. Ebola spreads through bodily fluids, creating extra risks in cases of gender-based violence including rape.

On the humanitarian side, we are doing everything we can to support national governments, UN agencies, NGOs and other partners as they work on healthcare, food security, sanitation and protection. Our coordination expertise has been requested.

Finally, I would like to touch on the coordination that is so important in responding to this crisis, including logistical support, information sharing, and mechanisms to direct resources from the broader international community.

Colleagues from OCHA’s regional office in West and Central Africa are already working in the affected countries and a UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination team will soon be deployed to Liberia to support the establishment of coordination structures there.

We are working closely with the AU, which is sending medical teams to the affected countries and playing an important role in moving relief goods and services across borders. I would particularly like to thank the Government of Ghana, for allowing the UN to establish an air bridge from Monrovia to Accra, and the Government of Senegal, which has agreed that its main airport can be used as a hub to airlift supplies to the most affected countries. We also welcome the EU’s efforts to mobilize its member states to support the response both politically and financially, and support a number of individual countries.

Unless we work together, there is a real risk that fear, stigma and isolation could take more lives than the Ebola virus itself.