

Ebola Crisis

by Rupen Savoulian

The head of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Margaret Chan, was speaking about the terrible crisis afflicting poor west African countries, namely, the growing outbreak of the Ebola virus. The Ebola virus attacks the body's immune system, undermining the latter and preventing the body from detecting the disease. Currently there is no vaccine, and treatments of infected people are basically supportive, i.e., helping the person's immune system recover and fight the disease, but without actually attacking the original virus. This disease has been known since the early 1970s. The 2014 outbreak though, is the most complex epidemic since the discovery of the virus, and the challenges facing health care workers with the current outbreak are severe.

For-profit medical system

Dr. Chan pointedly blamed the real culprit for this crisis; the for-profit medical system. The Ebola virus has been known for approximately 40 years, yet no vaccine has been developed because it was not profitable to do so. The pharmaceutical companies responsible for medical research into vaccines decided that, lacking a market, the development of an Ebola vaccine was not worthwhile. This demon-

strates the irrationality of an economic system that subordinates human welfare to the corporate bottom-line. The private ownership of pharmaceutical production and health care has meant that without a required vaccine, thousands of people have suffered needlessly, and preventable fatalities have occurred because of this disease. The for-profit medical system subordinates the physical and mental well-being of people to the pursuit of higher corporate profits.

from these nations while leaving the majority of their populations in a state of abject poverty. The nations of west Africa are among the poorest in the world. For instance, Sierra Leone has a GDP of \$4.9 billion. In comparison, the former colonial power of that nation, Britain, has a GDP of \$2.52 trillion. Liberia, with its GDP of \$1.95 billion, is dwarfed by its imperial master the United States, whose GDP stands at \$16.8 trillion. These economic statistics translate into massive inequalities for the

people of west Africa, most of whom live in fetid, disease-ridden, over-crowded slums without access to basic services. (The statistics above come from the World Bank.) Sierra Leone's main export is diamonds, accounting

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for 63% of that country's total exports, which could contribute to the wealth of that nation. However, Sierra Leone's people remain dirt poor. One wonders where all that wealth is going.

West Point is an administrative district of Liberia's capital, Monrovia. It is home to 75,000 people. The poor sanitation and hygiene conditions of the district have been known for years. For instance, West Point has an inadequate water service with only four public toilets—to be shared between

75,000 people. The beach serves as the lavatory, provides the drinking water, and fish from that water are consumed. Disease is rife, with outbreaks of cholera, tuberculosis and diarrhea. These appalling conditions have been known for years. Yet the Libe-

As Dr. Chan noted, Ebola has historically impacted the poor West African nations, namely Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. These countries, while gaining formal political independence during the wave of decolonization through the 1950s and 1960s, have remained in an economically dependent relationship with their former colonial overlords. Economic colonialism never truly ended for these nations, as they provide the raw materials and human labor power for giant multinational corporations headquartered in transatlantic countries. The deleterious impact of the Ebola virus, as well as

other vaccine-preventable diseases such as Dengue and Lassa fever, has been magnified by the poverty and immiseration in which these nations find themselves. Imperialism has plundered west Africa, and Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea still bear the brunt of the ravages of economic colonialism. The main imperial powers—the United States, Britain and France respectively—are responsible for a policy of malignant neglect, extracting the mineral wealth

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rian government and its colonial supervisor, the United States, have never addressed this serious public health issue. It is no wonder that a serious epidemic has spread so rapidly in west Africa, infecting thousands and claiming more than 7,000 lives at last count. It is time to ask why the Ebola outbreak, the most serious medical and humanitarian emergency in years, was missed by the relevant authorities.

Racist hysteria, xenophobia and panic

The reaction of the United States and other imperialist countries to the Ebola outbreak reveals a great deal about their domestic politics. In the United States, there has been an outpouring of racist hysteria, xenophobia, and panic about the threat of

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immigrants, particularly from west Africa, swamp- ing the domestic population and spreading this dis- ease. In fact, fear itself has become an epidemic. As thousands of west Africans were afflicted, there was hardly a murmur of concern. However, that all changed when one Liberian, Thomas Eric Duncan, was diagnosed with Ebola in the United States. Then, the corporate media went into full hysteria mode, as Nicole Colson from the US *Socialist Worker* explained:

... popular concern about Ebola is understandable given its frightening symptoms and lethal outcomes in west Africa, where thousands of people are in- fected. But that only makes the sensationalized frenzy of the cable news networks even more ap- palling, as they peddle lies and fear about the risk to anyone in the city of Dallas, where Thomas Dun- can, the patient in question, was staying. And they don't stop with Dallas, ei- ther. Right- wingers specu- lated about how supposedly lax US border security could be putting us all at risk. "We have a border that is so porous, Ebola or ISIS—or Ebola on the backs of ISIS—could come through our border," Fox News' Greg Gut- field hyperventilated, as a red "Alert" logo flashed on screen.

The nurses who treated Duncan were them- selves subjected to hysterical outbursts, even though they received proper medical attention and have sub- sequently been cleared of the disease. The main problem in the United States was not the Ebola virus itself, but hysteria and xenophobia, fueled by politi- cal opportunism of the lowest kind. Anti-immigrant politicians and right-wing crusaders have howled their prejudices over the airwaves, as Liberians, and west African migrants in the US, have been sub- jected to racial attacks and derision as they go about their lives. The stigma of infection has done as much damage to people's lives as the disease itself. Liberians in the United States have organized themselves and fought back; they have taken on the discrimina- tion and hate they face with calm dignity. They are Liberians, not a virus.

There is one measure that the United States has taken, one that significantly impacts the lives of the west African people, a measure that has gotten lost amid the maelstrom of hysteria and panic. The US has deployed troops to west Africa drawn from mili- tary personnel that make up AFRICOM, the military command structure and African military footprint of the United States in that continent. President Obama insisted that a militarized response was the correct one, because the United States needed to maintain its vital interests in that part of the world. The deploy- ment of US troops is not new, but the latest response in an ongoing competition in Africa for resources and markets by the imperialist states. Note that the first priority of the US empire is to protect its flow of minerals and profits, not the alleviation of human suffering, an affliction that could be prevented with the deployment of medical resources.

Cuba shows the way

There is one country, with only a fraction of the finances and resources at the disposal of the United States, that has sent doctors, health care workers and professionals straight to the afflicted regions, and has led the world in its medical international hu- manism: socialist Cuba. While the United States and Britain have sent troops, Cuba has sent thousands of doctors around the world, and has led the world in disaster management. Cuba actually has medical brigades, composed of medical personnel, equipped with the skills and logistics of tackling medical emergencies—all financed by the state.

Back in September, the Cu- ban health ministry announced that it would send 165 doctors, nurses and experts in infectious diseases to west Africa. This measure was praised by Dr.

Chan when she stated that this is

"the biggest commitment of personnel to the health crisis so far by any country." Even as some countries have committed funds or small treatment centers, she stresses, "The thing we need most of all is peo- ple, health care workers." Cuba possesses exactly what West Africa needs right now—a well-trained, organized and efficient health-care system. This is the judgment of the senior editor of *Medicc Review*, Conner Gorry, who explains that Cuba has the larg- est medical team on the ground in west Africa, the Henry Reeve Brigade, established in 2005 by more than 1500 Cuban health professionals trained in dis- aster medicine and infectious disease containment.

Cuba's government has directly offered to co- operate with the United States in joint efforts to combat the Ebola outbreak. Thus far, apart from low-level discussions and sporadic communications, the United States has not replied. Cuba's leading role in fighting the Ebola outbreak, its experience in emergency management and the organized response of its medical system has thus far been largely ig- nored, a telling comment on the priorities of the ma- jor corporate media.

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There is one head of state who immediately recognized the seriousness of the Ebola outbreak, urging the relevant international and local authorities to act decisively to save lives. He stated that:

A dreadful epidemic is advancing today on our fraternal peoples of Africa, and threatening us all. A high number of cases have been diagnosed with Ebola and many people have perished from the disease in several countries, including two outside the African continent. This poses a huge challenge to humanity, one that should be met with utmost ur-

gency. The action of the international community as a whole, under the leadership of the World Health Organization, the Pan American Health Organization and the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response, is much needed.

That was Cuba's President Raul Castro.

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carbon dioxide costs with the need for transportation across greater distances. Economic growth of 2.5% is necessary simply to maintain the unemployment rate where it is, and "substantially stronger growth than that" is necessary for a rapid decrease, according to a former White House Council of Economic Advisers chair, Christina Romer.

Under capitalism, all the incentives are to continue business as usual, no matter the dire future to which business as usual is leading humanity. Richard Smith, in a tour de force paper published in the *Real-World Economics Review*,

"Green capitalism: the god that failed" (March 2011, p. 121) summed up the dilemma:

[T]he problem is not just special interests, lobbyists and corruption. ... [Under] capitalism, it is, perversely, in the general interest, in everyone's immediate interests to do all we can to maximize growth right now, therefore, unavoidably, to maximize fossil fuel consumption right now—because practically every job in the country is, in one way or another, dependent upon fossil fuel consumption... There is no way to cut CO2 emissions by anything like 80% without imposing drastic cuts across the board in industrial production. But since we live under capitalism, not socialism, no one is promising new jobs to all those ... whose jobs would be at risk if fossil fuel use were really seriously curtailed... Given capitalism, they have little choice but to focus on the short-term, to prioritize saving their jobs in the here and now to feed their kids today—and worry about tomorrow, tomorrow.

"Green" enterprises will not be granted an exemption. They, too, will be pushed by market forces the same as any other enterprise. Dr. Smith writes:

Biofuels, windpower and organic crops—all might be environmentally rational here or there, but not necessarily in every case or forever. But once investments are sunk, green industries have no choice but to seek to maxi-

mize profits and grow forever regardless of social need and scientific rationality, just like any other for-profit business" (p. 142).

A duty to shareholders, not humanity

Putting the environment first in a capitalist economy is not realistic, and doing so anyway would be very costly due to capitalist dynamics. The IPCC is taking a head-in-the-sand approach with its claim that reversing global warming will be nearly cost-free. The more honest approach would be to acknowledge the high cost of saving the planet—and that the cost of not doing so, of continuing business as usual, will be far greater.

The European Commission estimates the cost of global warming in Europe could reach 4% of gross domestic product and estimates that almost 350,000 people per year will be displaced by flooding by mid-century. The National Resources Defense Council estimated that the US government spent about \$100 billion cleaning up natural disasters in 2012—one-sixth of the federal budget's non-defense discretionary spending and three times what private insurers paid out. Fifty billion tons of carbon dioxide equivalent is being thrown into the atmosphere yearly, and a US government working group estimates each ton will cause \$37 in future harms in today's dollars.

And what would the cost be of abandoning many of the world's cities if the ice caps melt? Of the world's bread baskets turning into deserts? Of dead oceans? Such costs are not calculated by the IPCC.

The IPCC's flawed approach does not derive from whatever political pressures have been exerted on it. The fundamental issue is that it can't imagine a world without capitalism. It has much company in that. But a future in which we live in harmony with nature, rather than destroying nature for profit, can only be a very different world.

Pete Dolack writes about the ongoing economic crisis on the Systemic Disorder blog. His book *It's Not Over*, an analysis of 20th century attempts to create alternatives to capitalism, is due to be published by Zero Books in late 2015.

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