



## The EU response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa

29 September 2014

With more than 6500 people infected and well over 3000 dead at the time of writing, the current outbreak of Ebola virus disease in West Africa is undoubtedly the worst in history. In addition, the indications are, unfortunately, that these shocking figures are vast underestimates. So far, the countries affected are Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

Several European teams, specialists in dangerous infectious diseases, have been dispatched to the area with mobile laboratories. The task they have been assigned is to support with viral haemorrhagic fever diagnostics, make rapid analyses of samples and confirm cases as quickly as possible. Despite their strong efforts, and indeed those of other agencies in the area, it has been highlighted by the Health Regulations Emergency Committee, during their recent second meeting on the Ebola outbreak emergency held on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September, that there is still urgent need for enhanced mobilisation and coordination of resources to facilitate response efforts; to engage the global research community and address key research opportunities.

The EU's awareness of this need was recently highlighted in a statement by Kristalina Georgieva, EU Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response, who said, "The situation is going from bad to worse, despite the brave efforts of humanitarian organisations and despite early and substantial assistance provided by the international community, including the EU. [...] We need to pool our efforts and provide adequate air transportation and medical equipment to our partners in order to fight this menace."

The European Commission has been scaling up its response to the epidemic since March 2014 and has, to date, pledged 38 million euros to strengthen healthcare systems, including spending in the areas of healthcare provision, food security, water and sanitation. A further 97.5 million euros has been promised which is intended to be spent in Budget Support (BS) operations to Liberia and Sierra Leone, to reinforce those governments' capacity to deliver public services - in particular health care - and macro-economic stability, and a further 5 million euros towards providing mobile laboratories for the detection of the virus and training health workers as part of the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, IcSP.

Additionally, in very recent news, it was announced by the EC President, José Barroso, during the high-level meeting on the response to the Ebola Virus disease outbreak held

in New York on the 25<sup>th</sup> September, that the European Commission will contribute with an additional 30 million euros package for humanitarian aid to support the continuing efforts.

The European Commission was already active in the concerned region in the fight against biological risks. The European Mobile Lab project (EMLab) started its activities in 2012, with the aim of setting up a collaborative network of EU and African institutions able to operate in common mobile laboratory units during severe outbreaks. For this purpose three mobile units for the diagnosis of highly dangerous pathogens (level BSL 4) were acquired.

At the onset of the Ebola outbreak (March 2014), the first of these mobile labs had been deployed to Guinea (Gueckedou). The unit has provided diagnoses for a large fraction of the samples collected (3000 to date), identifying more than 1000 positive cases. Up to seventy samples have been processed in a single day, with diagnoses available within four hours.

The remaining two mobile laboratories have been deployed more recently to Liberia and Nigeria. Local laboratory staff have been trained and further training is foreseen to reinforce the EMLab teams.

Learning from this deployment and in response to the growing menace posed by the Ebola outbreak, the EU, in cooperation with the EMLab network, other European Commission services and the EU Member States, has decided to engage in a new project to be called European Union West Africa Mobile Lab (EUWAM-Lab), with the aim of training more local and EU specialists and providing yet more equipment allowing an amelioration in intervention in difficult climate conditions.

The primary aim of the EUWAM-Lab project is to increase laboratory capacity in order that a better response to infectious disease threats of pathogens of high risk groups can be achieved. In the current and future short term, the laboratory will be deployed in West Africa, in order that an improved response to the current emergency can be provided. In the longer term, this capacity-building on the African continent in terms of preparedness to combat infectious disease threats is a timely and strategic objective in the framework of cooperation between Europe and Africa.

Launched in the beginning of September, the EUWAM-Lab project is being implemented by *Institut Pasteur Dakar*, *Fondation Merieux*, and the *Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale* with the managerial support of *France Expertise Internationale*. These organisations are already very active in the field of fighting against infectious diseases. They work in close cooperation with the World Health Organisation, the local Ministries of Health, and the international scientific community.

To aid in the long term sustainability of the project results, the project has been built on the framework of regional cooperation which has been created in the Western African countries through the implementation of the EU CBRN Centres of Excellence (CoE) initiative.

The EU CBRN CoE Initiative, launched in 2010, addresses the mitigation of and preparedness against risks related to CBRN material and agents. This Initiative is fostering and reinforcing cooperation at national, regional and international levels, with the aim of developing a common and coherent CBRN risk mitigation policy at national and regional level. Risk mitigation comprises prevention, preparedness and post-crisis management.

The CBRN CoE Initiative is already present in the area covered by the EUWAM-Lab project with a regional operation active in the African Atlantic Façade region which includes Benin, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Liberia, Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal, and Togo (the regional secretariat is based in Rabat, Morocco). The EUWAM-laboratory will be used for training local staff within a new regional project for the management of pandemics which is currently being prepared. Its purpose is to build capacities for regional surveillance and outbreak response in the countries of the African Atlantic Façade. The project is also envisaged to be extended to a second CoE secretariat covering the East and Central Africa region, which includes Burundi, DRC, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Seychelles, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia (the regional secretariat is based in Nairobi, Kenya).

Thanks to the CBRN CoE network, the EUWAM-Lab project will help these regions to build or reinforce capacity in the rapid identification of outbreaks, the biological determination of the causative infectious agents and the set-up of adapted control measures. This will be achieved by training the local scientific communities to perform early warning, surveillance, and to react in the most suitable way to specific occurring health threats.