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## The Other Side of Ebola: US Soldiers Can't Fight a Virus

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As the first dispatch of about a dozen U.S. Army troops returned from an Ebola mission in West Africa, a former U.S. officer told teleSUR on Tuesday that soldiers aren't trained for humanitarian work. They are now in quarantine at their base in Vicenza, Italy and will be in isolation for 21 days.

"We are billeted in a separate area (on the base)," Major General Darryl Williams, Commander of U.S. Army Africa, told Reuters in an interview. "Our food is dropped off and then we eat and throw it away. Nobody else touches it."

The U.S. Army has started isolating soldiers returning from an Ebola response mission in West Africa, even though they showed no symptoms of infection and were not believed to have been exposed to the deadly virus, officials said on Monday.

Major Williams oversaw the military's initial response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

### **Ebola the Enemy**

"We're going over there to take the fight to the enemy," Sgt. Maj. John Kolodgy of the 2nd battalion of the 501st Aviation Regiment, which sent 85 soldiers over the weekend to Liberia to provide airlift capability, told the Washington Post. "In this situation the enemy is Ebola and the

spread of Ebola in Africa.” So far, Ebola has only been present in five out of 54 countries in the continent.

Also last weekend, the “Iron Knights” from military base Fort Bliss, in El Paso, Texas joined hundreds of soldiers from the 101st Airborne who departed for Liberia in flights from Kentucky’s Fort Campbell.

The U.S. Army Africa directs the Africa Command, the unit charged with sending troops to the Ebola outbreak areas. U.S. Africa Army Commander Major Williams told ABC News that 882 military personnel altogether are assigned to Operation Unified Assistance and are on the ground now in Liberia and Senegal, directed by the U.S. Africa Command. Senegal was declared Ebola free two weeks ago, without help from the U.S.

### **U.S. Army's Plan**

The U.S. Army’s plan is to send at least a couple thousand more troops to the Ebola-stricken region of West Africa. A White House fact sheet released in September detailed the new mission will involve, according to the White House, using the U.S. military to assist with “command and control, logistics expertise, training, and engineering support.” One of these logistical support mechanisms will include setting up a command headquarters in Monrovia, Liberia’s capital, to coordinate the region and to act as a liaison between the U.S. government and international relief organizations. That initiative will involve “a general from U.S. Army Africa, the Army component of U.S. Africa Command,” who “will lead this effort, which will involve an estimated 3,000 U.S. forces.” The White House has committed US\$175 million of federal money to the Ebola deployment alone.

And now, in the face of the Ebola outbreak, people are taking the help they can get. The U.S. Department of Defense says that it has set up a 25-bed hospital in Monrovia, Liberia's capital, which should be fully in operation by the first week of November. When completed, the hospital will be staffed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Pentagon is also sending and financing units that can carry up to 12 Ebola patients for transport on military planes at \$200,000 per flight, working with Phoenix Air according to USA Today. In addition, the U.S. military says it is finishing construction of the first Ebola Treatment Unit at Tubmanburg, Liberia, and a second ETU will be on the way by the beginning of November, and a third thereafter. The DoD claims that the troops they will send to West Africa will receive military training “focused on infection prevention,” including the use of isolation units, training in how to use protective equipment, and how to improve clinical practice.

### **Are Soldiers the Right Choice for Humanitarian Aid?**

But former U.S. Army Captain Field Artillery Officer Michael McPhearson, from his own military experience, is skeptical that soldiers can be trained by the military for this kind of humanitarian work. “The military trains you to fight wars,” he told teleSUR on Tuesday. “The interactions with civilians are not good. In many countries, the civilian populations wish we would leave.”

Over five years ago, most of Africa was under the vizier of the chief of U.S. European Command in Belgium. The idea for Africa Command came from the Bush Administration’s National Security Strategy in 2002, which put Africa under the spotlight of U.S. foreign interests. Looking for a “more strategic approach for the continent,” Africa Command was established as “an evolution in policymakers’ perceptions of the continent’s security challenges and U.S. strategic interests there,” as Lauren Ploch outlined in her 2011 Congressional report U.S. Strategic

## Interests and the Role of the Military in Africa.

Then in 2007, when a U.S. delegation was sent on a tour of northern Africa to present the proposal to establish the Africa Command, they received a cold response even from friendly countries like Algeria. But in 2008, under former President George W. Bush and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, the DoD created U.S. Africa Command. The U.S. has been quietly building up its military presence in Africa since then, now enjoying a presence of at least 5,000 troops across the entire continent.

McPhearson, 50, is a veteran of the first Gulf War (1990-1991). Despite coming from a “military family,” his religious convictions led him to become conflicted about war. Now he works for U.S. nonprofit organization Veterans for Peace, seeking to become a “peacemaker.”

At first glance, McPhearson sees why the idea of military deployment in a crisis like Ebola could be appealing. “The U.S. military has the resources to set up facilities in a quick way,” he said.

Instead, McPhearson feels it would be better to “use our resources we put in the military to create units and organizations to house people so that the military wouldn’t have to be used.” He added that fighting Ebola should be an international effort, and “something we should learn from for the future.”

According to the DoD, the U.S. Africa Command transition team was allotted approximately US\$50 million in Fiscal Year 2007, and the command received US\$75.5 million for Fiscal Year 2008 and US\$310 million for Fiscal Year 2009.

ThinkProgress reported that significant funding is also being funneled into other Africa initiatives stemming from not just the Pentagon and the controversial U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), but also the State Department, Centers for Disease Control, Department of Health and Human Services and other government agencies. The Obama Administration is currently asking Congress to release another US\$30 million to send CDC workers and equipment to West Africa.

## **Africa as the Battlefield**

Nick Turse of the Centre for Research on Globalisation wrote recently that, “Today, the U.S. military increasingly confronts Africa as a ‘battlefield’ or ‘battleground’ or ‘war’ in the words of the men running its operations. To that end, it has built a sophisticated logistics network to service a growing number of small outposts, camps, and airfields, while carrying out, on average, more than one mission each day somewhere on the continent. A significant number of these operations take the form of a textbook hearts-and-minds campaign that harkens back to failed, and bloody U.S. efforts in Southeast Asia during the 1960s and 1970s and more recently in the Greater Middle East.”

Turse further wrote that civil-military operations like the kind proposed by Africa Command to combat Ebola are done in order to win hearts and minds, but the ulterior motive is spelled out clearly in black and white: to “facilitate military operations and achieve U.S. objectives.” The Pentagon has no qualms about admitting that humanitarian assistance efforts are designed to increase “U.S. visibility, access, and influence with foreign military and civilian counterparts,” while humanitarian and civic assistance efforts are designed to “promote the security and foreign policy interests of the United States.”

According to a testimony of General Charles Wald published in Ploch's Congressional report, a member of the Military Advisory Board, at a hearing on Climate Change and National Security Threats conducted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on May 9, 2007, an advisory panel of experts identified five aspects of Africa that have increasingly become the object of U.S. interests in the past decade: oil, global trade, armed conflicts, "terror," and HIV/AIDS.

*This article is the first in a week long campaign by teleSUR. Stay tuned.*

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