11-13-2014

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Ebola Sets Off Alarm in Central America but Experts Say Region Prepared to Avert Arrival of Virus

by George Rodríguez
Category/Department: Region
Published: 2014-11-13

The spread of Ebola in West Africa and the presence of cases in countries outside that region, such as Spain and the US, set off the alarm throughout Central America, a region along the northward route from South America to the US followed by undocumented migrants leaving countries in Africa and Asia.

No cases have been reported in Central American nations, and health authorities in these countries and in international organizations believe the region is not at high risk. The reason is that the journey those migrants set out on is longer than the disease’s incubation period, say the experts. Nevertheless, Central American nations have taken measures in an effort to prevent the virus from invading the region.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and regional health, social security, and water authorities met for two days in October in San Salvador to analyze the Ebola threat and coordinate actions.

The Reunión del Sector Salud de Centroamérica y República Dominicana (RESSCAD) of the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA) "centered on common problems and challenges in health and environment," including Ebola, "which require a joint and coordinated approach … in order to achieve a greater impact" than individually addressed, the Salvadoran Ministerio de Salud (MINSAL) stated in a communiqué.

On Oct. 14, three days before the RESSCAD meeting in the Salvadoran capital, PAHO and the World Health Organization (WHO) announced an international mission to support Central American efforts to stave off Ebola.

Countries providing protective gear to first-line contacts

Meanwhile, national efforts have been put into motion throughout the region, including screening passengers and undocumented migrants arriving from Ebola-hit countries plus purchasing equipment for first-line personnel, such as sanitary and immigration officials at border posts, airports, and ports.

Among other actions, in the region’s northern sector, Guatemala has declared a moderate alert for airport controls, since President Otto Pérez Molina, a retired general, has said that "the country is not exempt from the deadly virus."

Honduras, a neighbor to the south, has set up health centers at airports to check possible patients, while bordering Nicaragua has ordered that all incoming African travelers be isolated and has began distributing special wear for personnel assisting eventual Ebola patients.

Along those lines, Salvadoran authorities last month quarantined for observation two Congolese Catholic nuns, who did not result positive, for 21 days upon arrival.

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On the southern tip of the Central American isthmus, Panamá has set up temperature-reading equipment.

And Costa Rica, its neighbor to the north, is complying with the International Health Regulations (IHR) set up by the WHO, as Health Minister María Elena López told NotiCen. This includes training for health and security personnel who are the first line of contact with travelers arriving in the country, mostly thousands of health employees of the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social (CCSS), the government agency in charge of the country’s public hospitals, said the minister.

At the same time, a biosafety protocol has been activated for police forces, especially the Policía de Fronteras (PF), Fuerza Pública Commissioner Juan José Andrade said during a separate interview with NotiCen.

**Costa Rica following International Health Regulations’ guidelines**

"The country has developed what’s in the International Health Regulations’ guidelines dealing with the entry of passengers coming from countries with Ebola cases," said López. "A questionnaires is put to passengers coming from nearby countries because we’ve not had any visits of passengers coming from countries directly affected."

Training "obviously is a process that is going to take time because it’s 40,000 health workers in the Caja, plus the (Costa Rican) Red Cross and Immigration, and what we’re doing at the moment is what we believe is more useful, which is airport drills ... as if we were facing a real emergency, and the people organize themselves to provide the adequate response," the minister explained.

The drills have been carried out at Costa Rica’s two major international airports—Juan Santamaría, some 20 km west of San José, the nation’s capital, and Daniel Oduber, on the outskirts of the northern city of Liberia, some 230 km northwest of San José.

"They’re the airports with more movement and a greater possibility of a case arriving," López explained, adding that a similar drill is being scheduled to take place at Paso Canoas, in the south, one of the posts along the border with Panamá, some 320 km southwest of San José.

"We believe that, little by little, we’re going to train the people as well, tell them that, even if it’s a serious international problem, it’s a problem that can be kept under control because of the virus’ low contagiousness from one person to another. To catch the virus, one has to actually touch a [sick] person, and thoroughly washing hands, even just with water and soap—not to mention alcohol—the virus is neutralized," the minister added.

Regarding security forces, Andrade said that the focus of training is on police assigned to border security and that it began some two months ago. A Coordinating Unit—made up of officials of the Ministerios de Salud and Seguridad and the Fuerza Pública—was set up to apply the biosafety protocol in force, aimed at identifying possible cases arriving in the country. Measures also include the purchase of basic equipment—liquid soap, latex gloves, masks—and promoting hygiene habits among police officers the commissioner said.

**SOUTHCOM spreads alarm of massive immigrant flow**

But the Ebola alarm seems to have gone off the loudest not in Central America but at the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), mostly for border-security reasons. On Oct. 7, Marine Gen. John Kelly, the head of SOUTHCOM, told a Panel on Security Issues in the Western Hemisphere at
the Washington-based, Pentagon-funded National Defense University (NDU) that, should an Ebola outbreak occur in Central America, it could set off a massive flow of immigrants to the US, with the risk of infected persons entering the country. They could be brought in by organized crime networks that illegally transport undocumented migrants to the US, warned the general.

Kelly—who recently visited Costa Rica and Panama—warned that, if the disease were to hit Central America, especially countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, all with high levels of poverty and violence, it would wreak panic among the people who would try to run away.

"If it comes to the Western Hemisphere, the countries that we’re talking about have almost no ability to deal with it—particularly in Haiti and Central America," said the head of SOUTHCOM. "If it breaks out, it’s literally Katie bar the door, and there will be mass migration into the United States because they will run away from Ebola, or if they suspect they are infected, they will try to get to the United States for treatment."

Such a scenario is a possibility, and "it will make the 68,000 unaccompanied minors look like a small problem," Kelly added, referring to the thousands of Central American children—mostly Guatemalan, Honduran, Salvadoran—who have been arriving at the southern US border seeking to enter the US (NotiCen, Aug. 14, 2014, and Aug. 28, 2014).

The military chief repeatedly warned, during his appearance at NDU, about migrant transportation rings illegally moving people to the US and said, "We see a lot of West Africans moving in that network. ... The nightmare scenario ... is right around the corner."

**Cooler heads minimize risk**

But SICA's Consejo de Ministros de Salud de Centroamérica y República Dominicana (COMISCA) executive secretary Julio Valdés disagrees with the general's catastrophic view. SICA member countries "are getting ready" individually and regionally to eventually face Ebola, he told media in San Salvador on Oct. 17, adding that the aim is on "damage containment and relief."

Seven days later, PAHO consultant on disease prevention and control Enrique Pérez said, during a lecture in San José for local journalists, that "Central America has health infrastructure, medical centers, and wide coverage." Besides that, each country has taken the International Health Regulations into account and has taken measures to improve epidemic surveillance, including personnel training and communication with the people, Pérez said.

The Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios de la Salud (CIES) of the Universidad Autónoma de Nicaragua (UNAN) said 1,200 Nicaraguan graduates in epidemic public health are trained to face an eventual Ebola outbreak in the country, as well as in any other Central American nation. All CIES graduates would coordinate with the government of any country eventually affected by the virus to keep the disease in check there.

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