

An Open Letter to the Media and Policy-Makers on Ebola Hysteria

We Directors of African Studies Centers are concerned about hyperbole, hysteria, and inaccuracy in recent media coverage of the Ebola outbreak in three West African countries and in coverage of the infections that have occurred in the United States. We are in agreement with the measures that have been taken by President Obama in consultation with the expert advice of CDC and NIH professionals, but we are distressed that some in the media have distorted their coverage of the outbreak in ways that are having adverse consequences for the continent of Africa and its people, as well as individuals of African descent in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world. We call for empathy with and support for the people of Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, and we urge the international community to provide immediate and large-scale assistance. We also warn that excessively long quarantines on returning health professionals from Ebola-affected areas may deter other health professionals from volunteering.

We appeal to all responsible media outlets as well as members of Congress and political parties to refrain from extending the problem of Ebola beyond the locales of the three West African countries where it is a problem to the whole of Africa with little to no concern about the implications of their irresponsible commentary. Many media and political personalities refer to Africa as though it is one country instead of the second largest continent in the world—covering an area over three times that of the United States and containing more than fifty countries. The three West African countries where Ebola has been a problem are among the smallest countries in West Africa, accounting for less than five percent of the area in West Africa and seven percent of the population. Despite infrastructure and health care system problems, 99.5 percent of the people in these three countries have not contracted Ebola. In terms of location, these countries are closer to Western Europe than to Eastern and Southern Africa. They also have more functional and direct travel, trade and financial connections to Europe and North America than to the rest of Africa.

The echo chamber about travel restrictions from the “affected areas” or “West Africa” is not only meaningless as President Obama pointed out, but for those in the media and politics who advance such calls and have little to no idea about the size and geography of Africa, “affected areas” have become synonymous with the entire continent of Africa. Some politicians do not even bother to offer a nuanced perspective on this serious matter. As Directors of African Studies Centers, we have made much progress in our universities and adjoining communities to lessen some of the most damaging stereotypes about Africa and Africans. The prevalent Ebola hysteria has dire implications for future relations between the United States and Africa and makes the realistic portrayal of Africa in which we are invested as scholars and practitioners extremely difficult.

We call on all those in media and political leadership who have the long-term vital interests of both the United States and Africa in mind to opt for a teaching moment and refrain from inflammatory remarks and, instead, invite responsible and informed commentary on the situation from knowledgeable experts in academe and the media who will provide more sober and accurate analysis of the common challenges and opportunities which the U.S. and African countries confront or from which they could benefit.

Signed,

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