

Senator Jeff Flake
“A Progress Report on the West Africa Ebola Epidemic”
Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Africa and Global Health
Opening Remarks
April 7, 2016

Just last week the World Health Organization declared that West Africa’s Ebola epidemic no longer constitutes an international public health emergency. However, this does not mean that the affected countries of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea have fully recovered from the epidemic.

Today’s hearing gives us the opportunity to examine West Africa’s road to recovery from the deadly outbreak of Ebola in 2014 which infected more than 28,000 people, took the lives of more than 11,000 individuals before the epidemic was brought under control.

The epidemic decimated already weak health care systems in the three affected countries. It has also continued to wreak havoc on the economies, complicating recovery for governing institutions and hampering a return to normalcy for the citizens of those countries.

There have been a number of so-called “flare ups” of Ebola since the primary outbreak was brought under control including one ongoing outbreak that has already claimed the lives of at least seven people.

The U.S. government provided \$5.4 billion in emergency appropriations at the end of 2014 to assist affected countries in their response. More than \$2.5 billion of this funding falls under the oversight jurisdiction of this committee. More than \$3.7 billion in assistance remains unobligated, with some of it set to expire at the end of this fiscal year, and the remainder to be “available until expended.”

This is a substantial amount of money and it’s incumbent on this Committee to examine the successes and failures of U.S. efforts to assist in the Ebola recovery efforts.

This hearing is especially timely given the news reports that indicate that the White House will ask Congress to reprogram \$589 million of existing unobligated balances to address the Zika virus, and some of this will come from funds appropriated to fight Ebola.

At the height of the outbreak this subcommittee heard testimony that called for the establishment of first-rate healthcare systems in the affected countries.

I think we all share that goal, and it’s important to remember that simply providing affected countries with the tools they need to stamp out diseases, like Ebola, is not an economically sustainable model – this kind of health infrastructure necessary to address these outbreaks while providing other health services can only be sustained by the affected countries themselves.

*Is the U.S. helping these countries to put their healthcare systems on a path to self-sufficiency?
Have we helped mitigate second-order impacts of the epidemic by focusing assistance in a way that helps facilitate economic recovery and development?*

The physical accessibility of health services was a problem before the Ebola outbreak as was access to clean water for drinking, hand washing, and other activities central to proper hygiene.

Are we working to continue to address these kinds of systemic problems that likely contribute to recovery and certainly contributed to the severity of the outbreak?

We will examine whether our assistance to affected countries is complete enough to consider reprogramming Ebola money for other matters.

Will that reprogramming come at the expense of long-term efforts to help economic recovery in affected countries, and to ensure eventual self-sustainability of health care systems by those countries themselves? These are questions we want to answer.

Lastly, it should be noted that the Ebola recover funds were appropriated using the supplemental appropriations measure. These funds are not subject to spending caps established by Congress and they are not part of and long term strategic planning effort. As Congress prepares to potentially consider appropriation of another traunch of emergency supplemental appropriations this time to combat the Zika virus here in the U.S, its worth examining whether this method of appropriating is effective.

Does it result in smart investments or is there pressure to simply get the money out the door before it expires?

I look forward to hearing from the witnesses today and I'd like to thank them for taking the time to meet. I've met with each before, three of you in my office, and I appreciate the time and effort you have put into the testimony you are going to give us today.