



African Union

Support to EBOLA outbreak in West Africa

ASEOWA

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My Continent, My Pride

With the success of ASEOWA, could Africa be rising from under the ashes?



By Melt Sinala Ndlovu

Africa has come to a point of truth and strength in unity, as its people came together in West Africa to combat a serious threat to human life posed by the deadly Ebola Virus Disease since 2014.

Although the international community has played a critical role in the world's deadliest Ebola epidemic, the actual ground troupes; the driving force and spirit, and even the general perspective in the war against the disease is purely African; a process led by Africans - thanks to the innovation and initiatives of the African Union Commission.

I had often read in newspapers; heard in radios, and seen clips in television channels about the horror and havoc wrought by the disease in the three West African countries of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. News that the infection was rising by the day; that it had even spread to the populous Nigeria, and speculations that it could soon engulf many other African countries bred fear among people and governments.

Once infected, it was said, death was but certain. Worse, victims died in agony as they bled, vomited, or collapsed to their deaths with diarrhoea and exhaustion. Spread by direct person to person contact, the disease was one of the most infectious known to humankind. In some places, it had wiped out entire families or cleaned out villages. Many people had abandoned homes and fields.

Somewhere at the back of my mind I knew this would not go on forever. At some point, people had to intervene. Like a soldier who yearns for the battle front; I had this burning desire to go out there and help. When the opportunity finally came, I quickly stood up to be counted.

Come 21st of February, 2015, and my dream to serve fellow brothers and sisters of Africa came to fruition. At last, I would be among those determined to combat the menace. Even as some governments issued travel advisories against West Africa, volunteers from 12 countries were teaming up in their hundreds to the region, under the banner of African Union Support to Ebola Outbreak in West Africa (ASEOWA).

Once in Freetown where I was deployed, it became clear that the mission was a worthy project. I watched as survivors were hailed and feted by relatives and staff alike in the most African way. This encouraged me to immerse myself wholly into battle. All of us, the ASEOWA team, stood in solidarity with the people of Sierra Leone, step by step, and we were soon making headway.

It was saddening, though, to learn that hundreds of fellow health workers from other agencies, including doctors and nurses perished in the outbreak. Most had been infected attending to the sick, but had fallen like soldiers at the battle front. At the time, very little was known about Ebola, and there was little to protect them. But even in their untimely death, they became inspiration for us to fight even harder.



Melt and a colleague ready to go inside an Ebola Treatment Unit in Sierra Leone



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Like a baby who falls many times as he learns to walk, the West African Ebola crisis has unearthed and still continues to unearth more inadequacies of humanitarian assistance and response strategies among governments and organizations. There are clear indications of lack of well-coordinated efforts among all player organizations. While nobody expects everything to be 100% perfect, future missions could be crafted in such a way that they not only adequately meet the needs of people in the three affected countries of West Africa, but other regions as well.

Throughout this Ebola outbreak, the African Union was hailed as Africa's solution to African problems. The goodwill and opinion of the people was high, a factor that saw the organization draw more funding. Even as it readies itself to replicate success in other endeavours, it should critically evaluate if its actions benefitted those intended. If yes, then let it go ahead and play a bigger role; but if something went wrong, return to the drawing board and do it right!

Failures and inadequacies of organizations should always be noted and remedied. Just because one or two things went wrong does not mean an end. This response has shown that Africa can rise and lead in people-centred approaches which are within the African context. The continent's long dependency on spiced and sophisticated approaches from the first world has overshadowed its potential. This outbreak has shown that the same-size-fits-all approach may be detrimental.

In short, what I wish to impress on every responsible and considerate African person is that no one else can do it better than us. We could even adopt this to be our motto in this Ebola epidemic. Assuredly, with Africa in its place, positive and sustainable impact will be realized.

Let Africa remind herself about the legacies of such fallen heroes and forefathers like Nkwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba; and Nelson Mandela, just to name but a few. Let us live to tell our stories, and not those of others who come with bulging wallets and... God forbid... embark on various experiments on the African children, all in the name of aid... or research.

At the beginning of this outbreak, the African Union was under immense pressure to act, both from within the continent and externally. This led to long and agonizing debates how, when and who; and bold choices. Finally, the AU came up with the Ebola Task Force. The point of significance is that resources are successfully mobilized; ASEOWA was quickly born, and volunteers were deployed in a record four weeks!

Yet some critics continually ignore such efforts and continue misrepresenting Africa. I appreciate the fact that, even before ASEOWA deployed member country contingents; other individual African volunteers were already on the ground combating Ebola. If this is not Pan African Solidarity, then what is? I strongly believe Africa has the ultimate remedy for Ebola, prescribed by Africans themselves. But then the continent and the people must believe in themselves.

Simplified, most medical missions or interventions of any kind have own successes and failures. This outbreak was no different, although it is difficult at this time to fully understand the issues since we are still inside the epidemic. But the decision to deploy civil-military professionals in this emergency response was an exceptional pull out and one that will stand the test of time.

By themselves, the affected countries could not have handled an epidemic of such magnitude. At one point they were completely overwhelmed as the disease swept across the region like a wild fire. I salute all the African governments and Heads of States who supported the initiative. Indeed, the world has been shown that in Africa, there is unity in diversity.

May I humbly extol the remarkable work not only by volunteers who went on and off the field but also by notable personalities as the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, H E Nkosazana Zuma; former Head of Mission General Julius Oketta; Deputy Heads of Mission particularly Sierra Leone Team leader Dr Elizabeth Mugamb; staff of the African Union Commission, and all others who in special ways made significant inputs into the process. The scope and magnitude of the epidemic was beyond any government or organization, but somehow these people did it!

In conclusion, I call upon all Africans of goodwill to continue supporting the African Union as it seeks to improve on interventions. Events of the past one year are the start of a long journey towards African freedom, pride and identity. May all clinicians, public health specialists, academic institutions, political organizations, traditional leaders, business entities, Non-Governmental Organizations and particularly all volunteers who participated in this epidemic seek better approaches in outbreaks of similar magnitude in the future as this isn't the end.

Let there be a change of mind-set among all African people in their diversity. All of us should begin to play our due and honest roles. Every African person matters irrespective of their geographical location, political affiliation or socioeconomic status. Together, Africa can stop Ebola. May The Great Allah; God the Almighty, bless and replenish our motherland of Africa.

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