

Ebola virus to take centre stage in US-Chinese competition for African mineral resources

Today, 50 African Heads of State and Government will be gathering at the White House for an unprecedented US-Africa summit, the first of its kind ever held on U.S. soil. President Obama urged the summit after his 2013 African trip. The crises in Ukraine and Gaza may overshadow



the event coverage but the Ebola epidemic will likely occupy centre stage at the summit. President Obama has stated that his government is observing the epidemic with great concern. The summit may well result in the formation of an international coordination effort to confront the Ebola virus, which will trump such other African issues like Boko Haram attacks and kidnappings in northern Nigeria, the civil war in southern Sudan, al-Shebaab attacks in Kenya. The original agenda of the August 4-6th summit was an economic one, aimed at strengthening the relations of the U.S. with a region heavily courted by China and where growth prospects are higher than those the rest of the world (5.4% in 2014 and 5.8% in 2015, according to IMF estimates). Now, a microscopic creature has taken precedence, because it must be addressed in order to facilitate any economic initiative. The White House intends to promote initiatives such as 'Power Africa' to link 20 million households across sub-Saharan Africa to the power grid. It's not a secret that the United States is competing with China for influence and access to resources. China has invested

generously in the continent especially where mineral resources are concerned.

The Ebola epidemic in West Africa poses has threatened the economy of the region and foreign mining companies with sound sustainability policies are the best equipped to continue operations and survive. West Africa has grown tremendously in the past decade thanks to oil and mineral resources. Nevertheless, many African diseases, whose proliferation and effects have been managed elsewhere – such as, AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, and of course Ebola – continue to re-appear like a weed. Ebola is causing a veritable crisis: there is no vaccine, there is no test for diagnosis, there is no therapy, and there is a mortality rate of 90 percent. The valley of Ebola crossed by the river which flows into the Congo has given its name to the deadly virus identified here for the first time in 1976. And so far in Africa, the Ebola virus is akin to a biblical plague that resurfaces cyclically. The current manifestation is the worst epidemic in history. It started last January in Guinea from where it spread to Liberia, Sierra Leone and is now threatening Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria to mention a few. Cultural attitudes contribute to its intractability. In Guinea, the population is terrified, suspicious, to the point that it prevents doctors from entering villages.

The discovery of valuable mineral deposits in Africa has driven mining firms into increasingly far-flung geographic regions. This expansion has been accompanied by new and often unanticipated environmental and social and health risks that have substantial implications for corporate competitiveness and profitability. The management of sustainability is especially important in Africa given that it is fast becoming a region whose primary exports consist of its non-renewable resources. In many, if not most, countries of the region, exports of fuels and raw materials are one of the primary sources of foreign exchange. A healthier community and one

that is well equipped to deal with the inherent risks of any mining operations ensures a more favorable working environment, fewer lost hours due to health concerns and a greater sense of legitimacy and acceptance from the local population. In many 'rich' countries, governments establish a framework of rules and benefits that help businesses thrive thanks to widely available preventive and direct medical and safety rules and practices. In Africa, health and safety regulations are difficult to implement due to financial and sometimes cultural constraints. It is essential for private sector firms to invest in these areas in order to ensure the sustainability of their venture.

Africa is the global epicenter of at least three other pandemics: AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, which have acted as a powerful obstacle to development. Mining companies have gradually equipped themselves to manage the spread AIDS through special programs. For the past two decades the main 'sustainability' focus of mining majors has been AIDS prevention. Poverty, scarce human and financial resources and the endemic problems of the continent have made the situation more alarming. Even malaria, practically extinct in the West, remains a major problem: every year there are about 300 million cases and 90% occur in sub-Saharan Africa, with an estimated cost of a few years ago at \$ 12 billion. Tuberculosis offers an equally sad set of statistics. As for AIDS, one of the leading causes of death, it has prompted a massive reduction in the workforce – in some areas of southern Africa up to 30%. Resource companies operating in Africa cannot remain indifferent to these problems – not to mention instability, insecurity, economic marginalization.

