

The New York Times

# Ebola From The Front Line

BY THE NEW YORK TIMES

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CATEGORY 7: INTERNATIONAL REPORTING



The New York Times was the first American newspaper to report from the afflicted Ebola region, sending a reporter, Adam Nossiter, via bush plane into remote forests of West Africa in July. He traveled to the contagion's epicenter on rutted dirt roads toward places where panicked villagers had attacked outsiders with slingshots and machetes. He stopped when he heard a woman wailing in ritual singsong, keening the words, "Marie is dead." He followed her to her stricken village.

Before Nossiter's front-page article from Guinea, little was known about how the Ebola epidemic was swinging its mortal scythe among some of the poorest, most neglected people on earth.

How many were dying? How many were already dead? How fast was it spreading? The answers were hard to get. The sick were hidden in their hovels; roads were blockaded to keep outsiders away. Villagers preferred the potions of witch doctors to medical science.

Nossiter's article exemplifies the commitment by The Times to follow this dreadful story, no matter what it took. Three more front-page articles appeared before the World Health Organization declared the outbreak an emergency. The coverage was unstinting and sustained. In all, The Times ran more than 400 Ebola articles last year, more than 75 on the front page. Rarely has a newspaper poured more resources into a single crisis.

The reporting required boots on the ground — constantly disinfected boots at that. The work was dangerous beyond measure. The reporters wore no special protective gear; they tried not to touch people and things; they repeatedly sprayed themselves with chlorine. At the end of each day, they were left to wonder: *What have I touched? Where have I stepped? What bit of my clothing was exposed?*

The Times's coverage was foreign reporting at its pinnacle: informative, courageous, lyrical, probing, consequential. Several articles led to immediate policy changes, as shown in the Supplementary section of this entry: for instance, the freeing of vital medical supplies sitting idly for months on a dock in Sierra Leone, and the reversal of a counterproductive quarantine that had created chaos in Liberia's biggest city.

Dozens of Times journalists contributed, but the essential ones were part of an all-star team that met this challenge uniquely prepared: Adam Nossiter and Norimitsu Onishi are foreign correspondents who combined nine years of experience in West Africa; Ben Solomon is a videographer who knows the region so well he speaks one of Sierra Leone's tribal dialects; Sheri Fink, a Pulitzer Prize-winning physician, is so highly regarded that the doctors she covered let her embed for weeks in an Ebola treatment unit, the only reporter to do so. And, not least, Helene Cooper, a Liberian-American who ordinarily covers the Pentagon.

Returning to her homeland, Cooper wrote with a pathos that left some readers in tears. Close physical contact is endemic to Liberian culture, she explained, but now the simple act of touching placed a person in mortal peril. A mother could not hold her dying child.

Cooper felt the pain of these restraints deep in her bones. She fretted she herself had become infected with Ebola during her reporting. She could not embrace her sisters. "No, don't touch me," she said sharply, rebuffing a hug from her 9-year-old niece.

The Ebola epidemic had overwhelmed three woebegone nations: Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. The Times is the only American newspaper that still maintains a West Africa bureau. Nossiter is bureau chief; Onishi held the job from 1998 to 2002. Their seasoned understanding revealed itself in reporting that was clear-eyed, authoritative and heartbreaking.

When Onishi flew back into this impoverished region, he well knew that family was its only formidable institution. Now Ebola was destroying even that. He spent a month watching and reconstructing how the virus had dismantled the family of a young basketball star. Onishi raced against time on that story, fearful Ebola was about to kill the surviving relatives he needed to interview.

The contagion rendered story after story of immense sorrow. One of the most vivid was written by Nossiter and Solomon in August, describing the “front line” against Ebola: the doctors and nurses soldiering on even as colleagues contracted the virus and died, the janitors who cleaned up lethal pools of vomit, the burial squads whose handling of infected corpses made their own families treat them like pariahs.

The Ebola tragedy was overpowering in Solomon’s riveting and appalling videos. He observed a dying man, writhing and groaning, turned away by the overwhelmed staff at Monrovia’s largest hospital. He spent days with a heroic ambulance crew whose work was so risky they were shunned by their kin. One of Solomon’s extraordinary videos was played during an emergency Congressional hearing in October.

How could this happen? The world had been caught flat-footed by the emergency, and Fink’s early investigation into its tardy response explained exactly why. There was ample reason for regret. Gaping holes had opened in the international community’s medical defenses. And throughout the crisis The Times used social media, including Twitter and Facebook, to combat myths and distribute accurate information, as shown in the Supplementary portion of this entry.

The Ebola coverage culminated in late December with a definitive narrative that explained how a single case in a remote village spawned an epidemic. The article began with the leap from a diseased bat to a 2-year-old Guinean boy and tracked the rampaging virus. Last spring, early in the epidemic, victory was presumed prematurely — and well-intentioned epidemiologists made catastrophic decisions, failing to fathom the magnitude of the crisis.

The New York Times has gone to extraordinary lengths to chronicle the Ebola tragedy. The suffering goes beyond words, but we are proud to have given it our best. We are immensely honored to nominate this coverage for the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting.