

## Kuwait Times

THE LEADING INDEPENDENT  
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF  
ESTABLISHED 1961Founder and Publisher  
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## Focus

IMF UNDER PRESSURE  
TO CANCEL DEBTS OF  
EBOLA-HIT COUNTRIES

By Jeremy Tordjman

The International Monetary Fund is under mounting pressure to cancel the debts of the three poor West African countries hit hardest by Ebola, as their economies stall under the fallout from the disease. The calls for a debt alleviation for Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone are coming not only from anti-poverty organizations.

In mid-December, a UN commission also urged serious consideration for eliminating at least some of the debts of the three countries. And the United States, the IMF's largest shareholder, has taken a stand on the issue as well, exhorting the crisis lender to wipe out around a fifth of the \$480 million in debt owed by the trio.

Such a move would free resources to restart economic activities in the countries where the disease has taken more than 7,800 lives, US Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew said. Meeting in Australia in mid-November, the heads of the G20 group of leading economies stepped up the pressure when they said that the IMF's promise of \$300 million to help fight the epidemic should include debt alleviation.

The calls for the IMF, which lends money to economies most in need, but usually with attached requirements for reforms and financial discipline, have spurred the institution into intense reflection, and it could come up with an initiative in January.

"Staff are looking at further options to provide support to the Ebola-hit countries, through reform of an existing facility," a Fund spokesman told AFP. Traditionally bound to a narrow, orthodox mission of financial support and loans to governments that it expects to be repaid, the IMF in reality needs to expand its tools for aiding troubled economies.

After the earthquake disaster in Haiti of 2010, the Fund did create a mechanism for dealing with natural catastrophes that hit its borrowers. That made way for the IMF to eliminate \$268 million that the Haitian government owed to the fund.

But the mechanism is too restrictive to be applied to the Ebola epidemic: it is limited to "devastating" natural disasters. According to advocates of the move, even if the loans come with zero interest rates, they constitute a constant burden that can financially strangle the governments of Ebola-hit countries.

"A broad criticism of using loans to help very poor countries is that, formally, no matter how bad their situation gets, they must repay every penny," said David Roodman, an independent expert on economic development. Sierra Leone and Guinea both have had to make loan repayments this year to the IMF despite the Ebola crisis, according to Fund data.

The World Bank has understood the problem. It has mobilized \$500 million for the three countries in the form of grants "which never need to be repaid," according to Bank spokesman Phil Hay.

Doing the same is proving more difficult for the IMF. "It's like asking a banker to embrace not getting repaid—it goes against their nature," said Roodman. The benefits of a debt writeoff would not be small. "The important thing about financing coming through debt relief is that it

allows long-term investment on social infrastructure" like strengthening health care systems, said Eric LeCompte of anti-poverty group Jubilee USA. Indeed, the IMF has been accused of contributing to the weakening of the health care and disease prevention operations in Western Africa through tough austerity policies it required along with loans in the 1980s and 1990s.

That is the assessment of a recent study by three British institutions.

"Policies advocated by the IMF have contributed to underfunded, insufficiently staffed and poorly prepared health systems in the countries with Ebola outbreaks," said Cambridge sociologist and lead study author Alexander Kentikelenis. But the IMF categorically rejected their conclusion. "Such claims are based on a misunderstanding, and, in some cases, a misrepresentation, of IMF policies," a spokesman said. —AFP



## US OFF WAR FOOTING AT YEAR'S END

By Robert Burns and Deb Riechman

Taking America off a permanent war footing is proving harder than President Barack Obama may have suggested. US troops are back in Iraq, the endgame in Afghanistan is requiring more troops - and perhaps more risks - than once expected and Obama is saddled with a worsening, high-stakes conflict in Syria. Last spring, Obama described to newly minted Army officers at West Point how "the landscape has changed" after a decade of war. He cited then-dwindling conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. And he said Osama bin Laden, whose plotting from an Al-Qaeda sanctuary in Afghanistan gave rise to what became America's longest war, "is no more." "You are the first class to graduate since 9/11 who may not be sent into combat in Iraq or Afghanistan," Obama declared to a burst of applause.

But once again the landscape has changed. Once again the US is engaged in combat in Iraq - not by soldiers on the ground but by pilots in the sky. And the Pentagon is putting "boots on the ground" to retrain and advise Iraqi soldiers how to fight a new menace: the Islamic State militants who have their roots in the Iraq insurgency that US troops fought from 2003-2011. Once again there are worsening crises demanding US military intervention, including in Syria. Four months after his speech at the US Military Academy, Obama authorized American pilots, joined by Arab allies, to begin bombing Islamic State targets in Syria with the aim of undermining the group's base and weakening its grip in Iraq.

And once again the US is on a path that could expand or prolong its military role in Afghanistan. The US combat role there ends Dec 31, but Obama has authorized remaining US troops to attack the Taliban if they pose a threat to US military personnel who will continue training Afghan security forces for at least the next two years.

At his final news conference of 2014, Obama spoke just 18 words on Afghanistan, saying, "In less than two weeks, after more than 13 years, our combat mission in Afghanistan will be over."

As of Dec. 16, a total of 2,215 US troops had died in Afghanistan and 19,945 had been wounded. In Iraq, 4,491 died and 32,244 wounded. The wars produced far-reaching changes in how the military operates. Among the most significant: the frequent use of elite Special Operations forces, including the highly secretive Navy SEALs and the Army Delta force. The high pace of their counterterrorism operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and occasionally elsewhere in the Middle East, has given the president a more finely tuned tool of military power.

Shortly before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Obama, an Illinois state senator, called it a "dumb war." He warned of unforeseen costs and consequences, arguing that President George W Bush would be smarter to finish what he started in Afghanistan.

Obama's promise to end the war in Iraq was a key to winning the White House in 2008. He delivered on that promise, but the war was not really over. Events conspired to pull Obama back in. In January 2014 the Islamic State seized the Sunni city of Fallujah, scene of the bloodiest fighting of the U.S. war a decade earlier. The military expanded their offensive in June, sweeping across much of northern Iraq and capturing key cities, including Mosul. Whole divisions of the Iraqi

approaches the end of his sixth year in office he awaits Congress' formal endorsement of his new war against Islamic State. The administration wants a legal basis for the war, known as an authorization for use of military force, rather than continuing to rely on congressional resolution granted after 9/11 to justify the invasion of Afghanistan, wage war in Iraq and pursue al-Qaida elsewhere.

Obama has not shied away from using limited military force in other places, such as Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, when he decided that terrorists there threatened the US. Just weeks ago he authorized a US commando raid in Yemen to rescue a US civilian held hostage by Al-Qaeda's affiliate there. The hostage, Luke

into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon, America invaded Afghanistan to root out Al-Qaeda and topple its host, the Taliban.

The war's architects, including Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, deliberately kept U.S. troops levels low, hoping a new Washington-friendly Afghan government under Hamid Karzai would quickly take control and allow the U.S. to move on. In February 2002 there were only 2,500 American troops in Afghanistan.

In 2003 the US tried to move on. It turned its attention to Iraq, launching an invasion that swiftly toppled President Saddam Hussein but created a security vacuum and sectarian division. A deadly insurgency followed.



BAGHDAD: A US soldier patrols the Taji base complex which hosts Iraqi and US troops and is located thirty kilometers north of the capital Baghdad. —AFP

army folded, abandoning tanks and other American-supplied war equipment to the militants. That was not just a boon to the militants. It was a blow to US prestige.

Suddenly, inexplicably, Baghdad seemed within the Islamic State's reach. Two months later Obama gave the go-ahead for US airstrikes in Iraq. He ruled out sending ground combat forces, but at some point next year he may face yet another tough choice: whether to allow US military advisers to accompany Iraqi ground forces as they launch major counteroffensives, including an expected push to retake Mosul. Up to now, US advisers have been coordinating with Iraqi forces from a safer distance.

Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, repeatedly has said he will recommend ground combat troops if necessary. As Obama

Somers, was shot just as the commandos arrived and died of his wounds in US custody.

Obama insists he has kept his word to end America's big wars, the occupations and nation-building efforts that began with such promise in both Afghanistan and Iraq but ultimately defied US hopes for clear victories. In his speech Dec 15 at Fort Dix, NJ, Obama said 90 percent of the troops that were deployed to war zones when he took office are now home.

"The time of deploying large numbers of ground forces with big military footprints to engage in nation-building overseas - that's coming to an end," he said. "Going forward, our military will be leaner" but ready for "a range of missions." This era of US wars began in Afghanistan. On Oct 7, 2001, less than a month after teams of terrorists hijacked US airliners and flew them

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan the Taliban mounted a comeback no one in Washington seemed to see coming, turning the war there into the longest in American history. By the summer of 2006, Rumsfeld got a whiff of Karzai's concern about the Taliban's growing threat. A reporter asked Karzai if he was asking for more US troops. "Yes, much more," Karzai replied. "And we'll keep asking for more. And we will never stop asking." By the time Obama took office in January 2009, the US had 34,400 troops in Afghanistan, according to Pentagon records. He tripled the total, to 100,000, in 2010 in a bid to turn the tide and defeat the Taliban. That aim was never achieved; the Taliban took a heavy pounding in 2010-2011, but it remains a force to be reckoned with, in part because of sanctuaries it enjoys across the border in Pakistan. —AP

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