

Hello, my friends, and welcome back to the program that gives you our world ...As It Is, and lets you learn and improve your American English at the same time. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Today we hear from West Africa, where a virus ...and fear ...are spreading.

Then we talk about the word "gridlock." It has been used many times to describe the fact that very little work is done by American lawmakers in Washington. Why is that so? What can be done about it?

VOA ...As It Is ...and you! That's a good combination.

The Ebola virus is spreading in West Africa. People there are growing worried about Ebola, formerly known as Ebola Hemorrhagic fever. The disease kills many of its victims. The president of Guinea and other leaders are urging people to remain calm. But many West Africans say they are frightened.

Health officials say the first case was reported last month in Guinea's southeastern forest area. The Ebola outbreak has caused widespread fear as the virus spreads, and the number of victims rises.

Government leaders in West Africa say there is no reason to be fearful. But many people are becoming increasingly worried. Steve Doe lives in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia.

"I'm afraid. I mean the way it attacks one, you know, and the way it kills, you know. I'm afraid that the outbreak will be known in Liberia -- or anywhere for that matter. We're all human beings, so yes, I'm afraid, yes."

The aid group Doctors Without Borders said on Monday that at least 78 people have died from Ebola since the first suspected case was treated on February 9th. Officials now believe the virus has now infected more than 120 people in three countries.

Last week, Guinea's Ministry of Health reported that the virus had spread to the capital, Conakry. Aid groups are concerned about that because many people live close to one another in Conakry. And most do not have clean water or the use of a good waste treatment system.

In Liberia, medical workers have confirmed that at least two people were infected with Ebola. Sierra Leone has also reported suspected cases of the virus.

Last Saturday, Senegal closed its land border with Guinea in the southeastern part of the country. Officials hope the move will help stop the spread of the virus.

Papa Konaté lives in Senegal's capital, Dakar. He is worried that the closing of the border with Guinea will not keep Ebola from spreading to the city.

He says Ebola is a disease that can affect anyone, so yes, we are afraid. We pass people on the streets and then we enter into our homes -- and you see, here in Dakar, there are many Guineans everywhere. He says, you have many Guineans who come and go, who leave and come back without a problem. It's risky.

The World Health Organization says the Ebola virus is most often found in rural villages of Central and West Africa. It says most of these villages are near rainforests.

Health officials say the Ebola cases that were confirmed in Liberia can be linked to individuals who recently travelled to Guinea.

The virus is spread through close contact with bodily fluids, such as sweat or blood of an infected person or animal. The disease causes severe bleeding. There is no vaccine to protect against Ebola and no medicine to cure it.

Doctors say the only way to keep the virus from spreading is to stop the infections. Government officials in West Africa and aid organizations say they are working hard to stop the spread of the virus. They are urging people to do whatever they can to keep from becoming infected.

What Is Wrong on Capitol Hill?

Recent studies suggest that Americans are very concerned about political inaction in Washington and the inability of elected officials to compromise. Recently, a group of former politicians came together to discuss some ways in which current politicians can be more effective. Mario Ritter joins us with details.

Last year, a public opinion survey found that 83 percent of Americans asked were dissatisfied with the way the nation is being governed. The survey was the work of CNN and the research group ORC International.

Because of findings like that, leaders from the two main parties came together at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston, Massachusetts. The Bipartisan Policy Center and the USA Today newspaper organized the discussion. Speakers included former congressional leaders, Cabinet secretaries, and White House chiefs of staff.

There was little disagreement in the group about the causes of the current political problems in Washington. The Democratic Party has controlled the White House and the Senate in recent years. Republicans have held a majority in the House of Representatives. This combination, the speakers said, has led to inaction on major issues.

The situation has become such a problem that some lawmakers have decided to leave Congress. Republican Senator Olympia Snowe of Maine decided not to seek re-election in 2012 because she was tired of the political gridlock.

“It’s all about the next election. It isn’t about what we can do to craft the best policies to solve the problems. Absent in all of this is that they are not problem-solving anymore. It is always [about] scoring political points.”

Political observers note that members of Congress used to socialize more with each other. They also met more often with the president. He would use social events and personal meetings to find compromises on major issues of the day.

Today, observers say, there is less interaction among lawmakers from different parties. Victoria Kennedy would like to change that. She was married to Senator Edward Kennedy, who died in 2009. He was a Democrat and co-founder of the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate. Victoria Kennedy says Americans have to speak out and ask lawmakers to meet.

“I think the people need to speak out and say this isn’t what we want of our government, this isn’t what we want of our elected representatives, and we want you to break bread together.”

But former Republican Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi says lawmakers need to do more than speak to each other. He was the Republican majority leader during much of Bill Clinton's presidency. Mr. Lott recalls many political battles. However, he says the current politicians are less willing to compromise, and that, he says, hurts the country.

"It takes give and take. Having been in those positions where you have to make decisions, just hard-nosed partisanship where you say 'it's my way or the highway' and we are not going to do anything unless we do it our way, it won't work in a legislative body. It is a part of the democratic process, and we need to honor that. You need to stand by your principles but you also have to be a pragmatist."

Former Congressman Henry Bonilla of Texas says Americans have to get more involved in elections and the political process if they want to change Washington.

“You vote for these people, America. They reflect America’s attitude now, unfortunately. America really has to reflect upon itself now and how at the grassroots level, they have helped create this situation in Washington and try to fix it.”

Americans will have another chance to reshape Washington in congressional elections in November. All 435 seats in the House of Representatives and 36 seats in the Senate will be decided. I’m Mario Ritter.

And I’m Jim Tedder in Washington, reminding you that more Learning English programs will be coming your way in less than a minute. And there is world news at the beginning of each hour on VOA.

