

Guinea battles to contain Ebola as death toll rises

March 31 2014, by Mouctar Bah

Guinea's President Alpha Conde warned Sunday of a "health emergency" as authorities raced to contain a spiralling Ebola epidemic which has killed 78 people and prompted neighbouring Senegal to close its border.

Guinea's [health ministry](#) said that 122 "suspicious cases" of viral haemorrhagic fever, including 78 deaths, had been registered.

President Conde said his country was facing a "[health emergency](#)" but that "thanks to the international community, all measures have been taken to effectively fight this epidemic."

Latest information on the outbreak "allows us to be optimistic and confident about achieving a final and rapid success in our response to this problem," he said on public television, urging people not to panic.

Samples taken from a number of the suspect cases include 22 that tested positive for Ebola, three more than previously reported, according to the latest official figures.

Of these, half were in the capital Conakry, and the others in southern towns—six in Gueckedou and five in Macenta.

In Conakry, the fear of contracting the virus has prompted many residents to stay home or limit their movements.

A concert by Senegalese music star Youssou N'Dour scheduled for Saturday night was postponed in solidarity with the victims of Ebola and to avoid the "enormous" risk of contamination, organisers told AFP.

The European Union has pledged 500,000 euros (\$690,000) to fight the contagion, while the Senegalese interior ministry said border crossings to Guinea would be closed "until further notice."

The order affects crossings at Kolda and Kedougou in the south of Senegal that are heavily used by traders, particularly during a weekly market attended by thousands from neighbouring countries which has now been cancelled.

Those infected have been placed in isolation to prevent the virus from spreading, while aid organisations have sent dozens of workers to help the poor west African country combat the outbreak.

'Deeply concerned'

The EU's aid offer came after a plea for assistance from the Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS). The regional bloc said it was "deeply concerned" about the epidemic, which presented a "serious threat to the region."

The tropical virus—described in some health publications as a "molecular shark"—leads to haemorrhagic fever, causing muscle pain, weakness, vomiting, diarrhoea and, in severe cases, organ failure and unstoppable bleeding.

No treatment or vaccine is available, and the Zaire strain detected in Guinea—first observed 38 years ago in what is today called the Democratic Republic of Congo—has a 90 percent death rate.

Sakoba Keita, who heads the Guinean health ministry's prevention division, said it remains unclear how Ebola had arrived in Guinea.

Tests on the other cases of [haemorrhagic fever](#) are still ongoing to determine their origin.

"We hope to get (the results) quickly as these cases should be treated like Ebola as they are also deadly," he said.

Guinea is one of the world's poorest nations despite vast untapped mineral wealth, with a stagnating economy, youth unemployment at 60 percent and a rank of 178th out of 187 countries on the UN's Human Development Index.

The World Health Organisation said Liberia had reported eight suspected cases of Ebola fever, including six deaths, while Sierra Leone had reported six suspected cases, five of them fatal.

Ebola can be transmitted to humans from wild animals, and between humans through direct contact with another's blood, faeces or sweat, as well as sexual contact or the unprotected handling of contaminated corpses.

Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) said the spread of the disease was being exacerbated by people travelling to funerals in which mourners touch the bodies of the dead.

Guinea has banned the consumption of bat soup, a popular delicacy in the country, as the fruit bat is believed to be the host species.

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Citation: Guinea battles to contain Ebola as death toll rises (2014, March 31) retrieved 4 May

2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-03-guinea-ebola-death-toll_1.html

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