

Health expert warns funerals spread Ebola in Guinea

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French NGO Doctors without Borders (MSF) said it was doing everything it could to help stem a deadly Ebola virus outbreak in Guinea, but traditions were hampering the response.

MSF's emergency coordinator, Marie-Christine Ferir, said in an interview late Monday her organisation was using a three-tiered approach to "halt as quickly as possible" west Africa's first-ever haemorrhagic fever outbreak, which has already claimed 61 lives.

However, Ferir warned the spread of the disease to neighbouring Liberia was linked to local traditions in which people travel great distances to attend a funeral and mourners touch the deceased person's body.

"It requires special precautions to be taken, while respecting local customs," Ferir told AFP, adding that the Ebola cases in Liberia were a result of mourners with cross-border family ties attending funerals in Guinea before returning home with the virus.

MSF has sent 35 of its health workers to Gueckedou, in the country's heavily forested south, close to the centre of the outbreak, with the aim of treating those affected, identifying possible new cases and providing information to limit the spread of the disease.

"The priority is to identify people who have been in contact with confirmed or suspected cases, so that we can follow them and isolate them if they present symptoms," Ferir said.

"People must accept to go to our special units (when sick), because if someone suspected of carrying the disease remains in a community, that person can continue to infect others."

To date, no treatment or vaccine is available for the Ebola pathogen, which kills between 25 and 90 percent of those who fall sick, depending on the strain of the virus, according to the World Health Organisation.

Transmission of Ebola to humans can come from wild animals, or from direct contact from another human's blood, faeces or sweat, or by sexual contact and the unprotected handling of contaminated corpses.

The MSF has established a treatment centre in Gueckedou to help rehydrate those who have contracted the disease, while also helping them manage the pain and the high fevers brought about by Ebola.

Ferir says MSF is also making psychologists available to affected communities, in an attempt to "demystify" the illness and prevent both patients and those treating them to be stigmatised by local communities.

"The population needs to be on board and not against those who are there to help," Ferir said.

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