

Guinea Ebola death toll rises above 200, WHO reports (Update)

June 4 2014, by Nina Larson

More than 200 people have died from the highly contagious Ebola virus in Guinea, making it one of the worst ever outbreaks of the disease, the World Health Organization said Wednesday.

The UN's health agency said it so far had registered 328 confirmed or suspected cases of Ebola in Guinea, including 208 deaths, with 21 deaths registered between May 29 and June 1 alone.

Neighbouring Sierra Leone and Liberia were also increasingly affected, said WHO, which has described West Africa's first-ever outbreak of the deadly haemorrhagic fever as one of the most challenging since the virus was first identified in 1976 in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Two hundred and eighty people died in that outbreak, which was the deadliest on record.

To date, 79 confirmed and suspected cases have surfaced in Sierra Leone, which has seen its death toll from the disease jump from one a week ago to six, the agency said.

The virus, one of the deadliest known to man, meanwhile appeared to have resurfaced in Liberia, which earlier this year had seen 12 suspected and confirmed cases of Ebola, including nine deaths, but had not seen any new cases for nearly two months.

A person believed to have been infected in Kailahun in Sierra Leone came across the border and died in Foya, WHO said, pointing out that the dead body was taken back to Kailahun to be buried, WHO said.

Mustapha Brima, a member of a Sierra Leone government team charged with raising awareness about the virus, told AFP that village chiefs and elders were being educated on how to prevent its spread.

He stressed though that there was an acute danger of the virus spreading across the porous borders in the region.

"There have been serious interactions between tribes in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, speaking the same language and sharing identical culture since time immemorial," he pointed out.

Sierra Leone health ministry spokesman Yaya Tunis meanwhile stressed that the country's "level of preparedness and response is increasing and our focus is to save lives."

Sierra Leone has restricted travel in some areas, and reaffirmed an earlier ban on trips to funerals in neighbouring Guinea in a bid to stop the spread of the disease.

Possible to overcome Ebola

Aid organisation Doctors Without Borders (MSF) suggested Wednesday that the practice of moving dead to be buried in other villages, along with the reluctance of the sick to go to hospital could explain why it is so difficult to get the situation under control.

West African authorities have also been struggling to stop mourners from touching bodies during traditional funeral rituals, while getting populations in both Sierra Leone and Guinea to cooperate with aid

workers remains a challenge.

MSF said Wednesday it was working with the Sierra Leone health ministry to set up an Ebola treatment centre in the village of Koindu, the epicentre of the epidemic in that country.

"Ebola is a disease that scares people and that is perceived as mysterious, but people can overcome it," Marie-Christine Ferir, MSF emergency coordinator, stressed in a statement.

Since the outbreak began in Guinea in January, nearly 30 patients treated by MSF have recovered, she pointed out.

The Freetown-based Coalition of Religious Youths meanwhile announced a 21-day prayer and fasting session, blaming the epidemic on the country's sinful citizens.

Ebola is a tropical virus that can fell its victims within days, causing severe fever and muscle pain, weakness, vomiting and diarrhoea—in some cases shutting down organs and causing unstoppable bleeding.

No medicine or vaccine exists for Ebola, which is named after a small river in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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