

W. African nations begin crisis talks as Ebola spreads (Update)

July 2 2014, by Nana Boakye-Yiadom

Health ministers from across western Africa met on Wednesday to plan "drastic action" against the world's deadliest-ever Ebola epidemic as dozens of new cases continued to emerge.

There have been 759 confirmed or suspected cases of the haemorrhagic fever in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Tuesday, with 467 people dead.

The new death toll represented a rise of 129—or 38 percent—since the UN agency's last bulletin given just a week ago.

"This makes the ongoing Ebola outbreak the largest in terms of the number of cases and deaths as well as geographical spread," the WHO said in a statement announcing the two-day conference, which opened in Ghana's capital Accra, with 11 west African health ministers attending.

"Decisions taken at this meeting will be critical in addressing the current and future outbreaks," it said.

Since the region's first ever epidemic of the deadly and highly contagious fever broke out in Guinea in January, the WHO has sent in more than 150 experts to help tackle the regional crisis.

Despite the efforts of the UN agency and other health workers, there has been a "significant increase" in the rate of new cases and deaths in recent weeks, the WHO said.

Medical charity Doctors Without Borders, which is known by its French initials MSF, said last week that the spread of the virus, which has had a mortality rate of up to 90 percent in previous outbreaks, was "out of control", with more than 60 outbreak hotspots.

The agency has warned that Ebola could spread to other countries, warning those hardest hit could struggle to contain the disease.

The agency's top Ebola specialist Pierre Formenti told AFP last month that the recent surge in cases had come in part because efforts to contain the virus had been relaxed too quickly after the outbreak appeared to slow down in April.

"One case can restart an entire epidemic," he warned, justifying the dramatic measures taken to contain Ebola, which is spread via bodily fluids including sweat, meaning just touching an infected person is enough to spread the virus.

Unstoppable bleeding

Ministers from Guinea, where 413 confirmed, suspected and probable cases have surfaced so far including 303 deaths, and Liberia, which has seen 107 cases and 65 deaths, will take part in the meeting.

Sierra Leone, which has recorded 239 cases and 99 deaths, will also be represented at the conference.

In addition, officials from Ivory Coast, Mali, Senegal, Gambia and Guinea-Bissau, along with Ghana and countries as far afield as Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo have been invited, the WHO said.

They will be joined by a host of UN agencies and other aid organisations

including MSF and the Red Cross, as well as personnel from disease control centres in western Africa, the United States, Britain and the European Union.

The WHO has described the current Ebola epidemic as one of the most challenging since the virus was first identified in 1976 in what is now DR Congo.

That outbreak, the deadliest until this year, killed 280 people, according to WHO figures.

Ebola 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 specific medicine or vaccine exists for the virus, which is named after a small river in the DR Congo.

"So far we are free from Ebola but we cannot rest on our laurels," a spokesman for Ghana's health ministry told AFP.

"We can't afford to have Ebola in Ghana and we also need to stop this from spreading in the other west African nations."

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