

Battle to contain Ebola intensifies with Nigeria seeking volunteers

August 9 2014, by Aderogba Obisesan

The battle to contain the deadly Ebola outbreak continued on Saturday with Nigeria appealing for volunteers to help halt the spread of the virus and Guinea shutting its land borders with two west African neighbours.

A day after the World Health Organization declared the epidemic an international health emergency, countries as far afield as India were scrambling to impose measures to prevent contagion of the virus which has claimed almost 1,000 lives.

The UN health agency stopped short of calling for global travel restrictions, but some countries on Saturday began imposing bans.

Zambia announced that it was denying entry to citizens from countries hit by the virus, while Chad suspended all flights from Nigeria.

Nigeria along with Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia are the hardest hit countries by the epidemic, which the WHO has called the worst in four decades.

Authorities in Lagos, the largest city in Africa's most populous country, said they needed volunteers because of a shortage of medical personnel.

"I won't lie about that," Lagos state health commissioner Jide Idris said on television, as the city, home to some 20 million people confirmed nine cases of Ebola, including two deaths.

In Guinea, the government announced that it was closing its land borders with neighbouring Liberia and Sierra Leone temporarily to give the three countries time to take concerted action to halt contagion.

Sierra Leone meanwhile deployed some 1,500 troops to enforce quarantine measures in two eastern districts where most of the country's confirmed cases had stemmed from.

Beyond the epicentre of the epidemic, countries as far away as India were also taking action.

Airports in the Asian country of 1.25 billion people went on alert and the government opened an emergency helpline on Saturday.

India, the world's second most populous country, has nearly 45,000 nationals living in the four Ebola-affected west African nations, and health officials said there was a possibility of some returning to their home country if the outbreak worsens.

India's Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said in a statement that his country has "put in operation the most advanced surveillance and tracking systems" for the haemorrhagic virus.

"There is no need to panic," Vardhan said, calling the risk of Ebola cases in India "low".

'No need to panic'

Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan warned against spreading false information about Ebola "which can lead to mass hysteria, panic and misdirection, including unverified suggestions about prevention, treatment, cure and spread of the virus."

Local media reported on Saturday that two people had died in Nigeria's central Plateau state and about 20 have been hospitalised after they ingested an excessive amount of salt which they believed could prevent Ebola.

Nigeria's Health Minister Onyebuchi Chukwu dismissed the salt and water solution as "total rubbish".

Meanwhile, Chantal Pascaline, a Congolese nun who worked with Spanish Catholic missionaries in Liberia, died of Ebola early on Saturday in the capital Monrovia, her Madrid-based charity said.

Pascaline worked with Spanish priest Miguel Pajares, 75, who left Liberia on Thursday and returned to Spain to receive treatment after contracting Ebola.

'Africans should get new drug'

Spread by close contact with an infected person through bodily fluids such as sweat, blood and tissue, Ebola causes fever and, in the worst cases, unstoppable bleeding.

As African nations struggled with the scale of the epidemic, the scientists who discovered the virus in 1976 have called for an experimental drug being used on two infected Americans to be made available to Africans.

The two Americans, who worked for aid agencies in Liberia before returning to the United States for treatment, have shown signs of improvement since being given ZMapp, made by US company Mapp Pharmaceuticals.

There is no proven treatment or cure for Ebola and the use of the

experimental drug has sparked an ethical debate.

The WHO, which is planning a special meeting next week to discuss the issue, said on Saturday that clinical trials of a preventative vaccine by British pharma giant GlaxoSmithKline may begin next month, and it could be available by 2015.

"We are targeting September for the start of clinical trials, first in the United States and certainly in African countries, since that's where we have the cases," Jean-Marie Okwo Bele, the WHO's head of vaccines and immunisation, told French radio.

Separately, Marie-Paule Kieny, assistant director-general of the UN health agency, told AFP that it was "realistic" to expect a vaccine to be ready by 2015.

The WHO, Kieny said, was "engaging with quite a number of developers ... to see what we can do to help accelerate and facilitate the development".

In Canada, a hospital put a patient in isolation after he arrived in the country from Nigeria, local media said.

A doctor at the Brampton, Ontario hospital, near Toronto, said the patient had a fever and other symptoms similar to those seen in Ebola cases, the news channel CP24 said.

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