Ebola outbreak claims first European victim

August 12 2014, by David Williams

An elderly Spanish priest became the first European to die from a fast-spreading Ebola outbreak on Tuesday, succumbing to the virus in a Madrid hospital five days after being evacuated from Liberia.

The 75-year-old Roman Catholic priest, Miguel Pajares, had been treated in Spain with an experimental US serum, ZMapp, after being flown to Madrid on August 7.

He was the first patient to be evacuated to Europe from the African outbreak, which has claimed 1,013 lives since early this year, according to the World Health Organisation.

The Spanish priest contracted Ebola at the Saint Joseph Hospital in the Liberian capital Monrovia where he worked with infected patients.

He died at 9:28 am (0728 GMT), a spokeswoman for Madrid's La Paz-Carlos III hospital said, confirming that he had been treated with ZMapp.

The priest's remains will be incinerated to avoid any risk to health professionals, the hospital said in a statement.

A few days before the Spaniard's evacuation, two US missionary workers with Ebola were repatriated from Monrovia. They are being treated with ZMapp at an isolation unit at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia.

The unproven medicine arrived at Madrid's La Paz-Carlos III hospital on Saturday after Spain's drug safety agency exceptionally cleared its import to treat the missionary.

'The wolf is Ebola'

Acting as a spokeswoman for the priest's family, Begona Martin, his cousin, compared the Ebola outbreak to the fable of the boy who cried wolf.

"The wolf arrived when no-one expected and it ate everyone. The wolf in this case is Ebola and they were all helpless," she told Cadena Ser radio.

Spain's Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and the royal family, including King Felipe VI, conveyed their condolences on Twitter.

Ebola has claimed four lives in 10 days among the staff at Saint Joseph Hospital in Monrovia, including its director, Cameroon-born Patrick Nshamdze. The hospital was closed on August 1.

A Roman Catholic order that set up the charity running the hospital has said it fears inadequate safety precautions were put in place.

The hospital is run by the Juan Ciudad ONGD charity, established by a Spanish Roman Catholic order, the Hospitaller Brothers of St. John of God.

'Lack of precautions'

The religious order's spokeswoman, Adriana Castro, told AFP on Monday that staff may have relaxed safety precautions after a test

wrongly showed the hospital director to be clear of the virus.

"We don't know 100 percent but it is probable that is how Pajares was infected and possibly from Pajares the virus extended among people who were there," she said.

"Until they knew they were positive with Ebola they did not take precautions," she said.

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

The Spanish religious order declined to comment on letters purportedly from Pajares describing his fear of Ebola and a lack of basic equipment to protect against its spread.

"Today, July 9 we had the first death from Ebola in our hospital. Many of us who work here, including me, were in contact with the deceased even though we did not have gloves to protect ourselves," the missionary wrote to friends and family according to Spanish daily El Mundo.

Five days later he reportedly wrote: "You will find it hard to believe but we lack the most basic protection: gloves, protective clothing, masks, disinfectants etc."

The WHO issued advice in April to healthcare workers to take precautions against infection even when Ebola has not been confirmed in patients.

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