

India steps up watch for deadly Ebola virus

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India's airports went on alert and the government opened an emergency helpline Saturday as part of measures to tackle any outbreak of the deadly Ebola epidemic in the country of 1.25 billion people.

India has nearly 45,000 nationals living in the four Ebola-affected West African nations and [health officials](#) said there was a possibility of some of them returning to their home country if the outbreak worsens.

The illness was declared an international health emergency by the World Health Organization Friday and authorities voiced fears the virus could spread worldwide.

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

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

But the New Indian Express newspaper voiced concern in an editorial that India's already overburdened health services could not cope with any Ebola outbreak.

A country as "populous as India cannot afford to set up adequate isolation, containment facilities and equip medical personnel with protective gear", the newspaper said.

There are some 4,700 Indians in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the three countries worst hit by the disease, while another 40,000 live in Nigeria, which has also reported Ebola.

"If the situation worsens, there could be a possibility of these Indians travelling back," the [health](#) minister said.

"Preparedness measures are in place to deal with any case of the virus," he said.

The WHO had informed India about a traveller who was possibly exposed to Ebola. He tested negative but has been told to report to authorities if he develops any symptoms, the ministry said.

The ministry said an "emergency operation centre" helpline for reporting any cases started operations Saturday and "surveillance is being strengthened at airports and ports".

The government is setting up centres at airports and ports to deal with travellers showing any potential symptoms of Ebola, spread through close contact with bodily fluids of people who who are sick.

All air passengers arriving in India from Ebola-affected countries must now fill in a symptom-checklist form and provide addresses as the government builds a database to track people who might develop symptoms.

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