

# Ebola toll hits 2,400 as Cuba pledges medics

September 12 2014, by Nina Larson

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The worst-ever Ebola outbreak has killed more than 2,400 people, the UN said Friday, as Cuba pledged the largest foreign medical team deployed so far in the west African health crisis.

World Health Organization chief Margaret Chan warned the spiralling epidemic of the murderous tropical virus demanded a stronger, faster response from the international community.

In the three hardest-hit countries, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, "the number is moving faster than the capacity to manage them," she told reporters in Geneva.

As of Friday, 4,784 people had been infected with Ebola and more than 2,400 of them had died, Chan said.

She did not specify if the figures also included Nigeria, which has reported 21 cases, eight fatal, since the deadliest Ebola outbreak on record began in Guinea at the start of the year.

Chan's alarm call came after the UN vowed its peacekeeping force in Liberia would "stay the course" against Ebola in the country.

## People needed most of all

Transmitted through bodily fluids, the tropical virus can cause fever, vomiting, diarrhoea, organ failure and internal and external bleeding, killing more than half of those infected.

There are no licenced treatments or vaccines for Ebola, but the WHO has endorsed rushing out potential cures and hopes a tentative vaccine will be available by November.

Chan stressed Friday though that "the thing we need most of all is people" on the ground.

She welcomed a pledge from Cuba to send 62 doctors and 103 nurses to Sierra Leone, where more than 500 people have died, marking the "largest" such commitment to date.

The UN health agency estimates that another 500 foreign health professionals and around 1,000 local doctors and nurses are needed to stop its deadly surge through west Africa.

Starting the first week of October, the Cuban health workers will remain for six months, Cuban Health Minister Roberto Morales Ojeda told the Geneva news conference.

All have "previously participated in post-catastrophe situations," and all volunteered for the mission, he said.

Cuba, which has a long tradition of sending its world-renowned medics to help with situations around the globe, has thus pledged the biggest team to date to take part in the Ebola fight.

The United States has already sent some 100 medics, and the African Union pledged this week to send around 100 more.

China has also sent in medical teams, while France is sending doctors to Guinea and Britain is planning to build and help staff a field hospital in Sierra Leone.

WHO and the Doctors Without Borders charity meanwhile each count around 200 international medical experts on the ground in the region, while WHO has 300 more on standby.

## **2,000 orphans in Liberia**

While welcoming the push in Sierra Leone, Chan said Friday the situation in neighbouring Liberia was especially desperate, with not a single bed left to treat Ebola patients.

The UN said its peacekeepers would not abandon the country, whose war-ravaged health services were on the slow road to recovery when the Ebola outbreak began.

"We are here to stay the course and to help the people of Liberia and its neighbours to get through this terrible crisis," UN peacekeeping chief Herve Ladsous told AFP late Thursday.

The UN mission has been in the country since the end of 14 years of devastating civil war in 2003 but has been downsizing from a peak of 15,000 troops.

Health workers in Liberia have reported being overwhelmed by new Ebola cases, with the WHO predicting an "exponential increase" in infections there.

The outbreak is taking an especially dire toll on children, Sarah Crowe, head of UNICEF's crisis communication in Liberia, warned Friday.

In addition to falling victim to Ebola themselves, many children are losing their caregivers, with some 2,000 orphaned in Liberia alone, she said.

Children who lose family members to Ebola meanwhile can face "deep stigma", and are often rejected by the community and forced to roam the streets without proper parental care, shelter or food, Crowe said.

Around 20 percent of children with family members who have died from Ebola in Liberia are under the age of two, according to UNICEF.

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