

Liberia to provide 1,000 Ebola beds in overwhelmed capital

September 21 2014, by Zoom Dosso

Liberia announced plans Sunday for a four-fold increase in beds for Ebola patients in its overwhelmed capital Monrovia, as US troops arrived to help tackle the deadly epidemic.

The announcement came two weeks after the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that the country, worst-hit in the regional outbreak, with more than 1,450 deaths, would soon face thousands of new cases.

"Patients are being rejected... because there is no space. So the government is trying its best to finish the 1,000 beds so we can accommodate all the patients," Information Minister Lewis Brown told AFP.

Brown, who also announced the opening on Sunday of a third treatment unit in Monrovia, said the plan was to have the extra beds in place by the end of October.

"That way, we will curtail the spread because those who are rejected go back to their communities where they can possibly infect other people," he said.

A second deployment of US troops arrived on Sunday at Liberia's international airport, 55 kilometres (35 miles) east of Monrovia, as part of an eventual 3,000-strong mission to help battle the outbreak.

"Some American troops came this morning. They arrived with tactical

jeeps," an airport source told AFP, without giving the size of the unit.

Pentagon spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby told reporters on Friday that a C-17 transport aircraft with equipment and seven service members had already landed, with two more cargo planes carrying 45 personnel due to follow.

The team will set up a headquarters for Major General Darryl Williams, who will oversee the US mission to train local health workers and establish additional medical facilities, he said.

Military engineers are due to build new Ebola treatment centres in affected areas, the Obama administration said last week, while US officials will help recruit medical personnel to work at the units.

The latest WHO figures show Liberia reporting 2,710 Ebola cases, but those were given a week ago, and the government's two Ebola units in Monrovia say they have been deluged by patients in recent days.

Begging for their lives

The centres currently provide 100-120 beds, with aid agency Doctors Without Borders offering a further 260-70. The third centre opened Sunday will add a further 150 beds.

The deadliest Ebola epidemic the world has seen is spreading across west Africa, with Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, the worst affected nations.

The fever that the virus unleashes can fell its victims within days, causing severe muscle pain, vomiting, diarrhoea and—in many cases—unstoppable internal and external bleeding.

The death toll has topped 2,600 across west Africa, out of more than 5,300 people infected.

The WHO says the number of new cases is moving far faster than the capacity to manage them in Ebola-specific treatment centres.

Two weeks ago it called on development partners trying to help Liberia respond to the outbreak "to prepare to scale up their current efforts by three- to four-fold."

An Ebola treatment facility hastily improvised by WHO for the Ministry of Health, was recently set up to manage 30 patients, but had more than 70 patients as soon as it opened, the WHO said.

"In Monrovia, taxis filled with entire families, of whom some members are thought to be infected with the Ebola virus, crisscross the city, searching for a treatment bed. There are none," the agency said.

"As WHO staff in Liberia confirm, no free beds for Ebola treatment exist anywhere in the country."

In Monrovia, aid workers have reported having to take on the grim task of turning away patients who were begging for their lives.

When patients are turned away from Ebola treatment centres, they generally return to their communities, where they infect others, perpetuating constantly higher flare-ups in the number of cases, the WHO says.

"I am here since this morning, I was here yesterday and the day before, but they keep telling me to go and come back," Fatima Bonoh, 35, told AFP on Sunday, shivering at the entrance of the Redemption hospital, an Ebola referral unit.

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