

WHO: East Asia at risk of Ebola, but more prepared

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East Asia, with its trade and transport hubs and armies of migrant workers, is at risk from Ebola but is improving its defenses and may be more ready than other areas to respond if cases are diagnosed, World Health Organization officials said Friday.

Shin Young-soo, the WHO regional director for the Western Pacific, said East Asia has been a "hotspot" for emerging diseases in the past and has dealt with SARS and avian flu, so it is more prepared than other regions to respond after learning the importance of public education, strong surveillance and transparency.

An outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, began in southern China in 2002 and infected about 8,000 people worldwide, killing nearly 800.

The current outbreak of the Ebola virus has killed more than 3,800 people, the vast majority of them in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, according to the World Health Organization.

Shin says member countries are putting up strong infrastructure preparedness for Ebola and each has an emergency operating center linked to the regional office in Manila and the WHO headquarters in Geneva.

"All these travel, economic trade, and we have global hubs like Singapore, Hong Kong, and the Philippines is sending a lot of work

forces all over the world," make it a possibility for the virus to reach East Asia, Shin said. But "we are in a better shape than other regions," he added.

Li Ailan, director of health security and emergencies at the WHO regional office, said two candidate Ebola vaccines under development in the U.S. and United Kingdom are now in the human clinical trial phase and a vaccine may be ready on a limited scale by January. Health care workers and those who handle dead bodies of Ebola victims are being recommended as the priority recipients.

Philippine Health Secretary Enrique Ona said the Philippines is considering a request by the U.S. and U.K. for the country to send health workers to Ebola-hit West African countries, where there is a shortage of health personnel. A firm decision will be made within a week.

The Philippines has some 8,000 workers in Ebola-affected countries in West Africa and 115 peacekeepers in Liberia.

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