

World fears mount that Ebola battle being lost

October 17 2014, by Jonathan Fowler

The World Bank warned Friday the fight to stop Ebola was being lost, as the UN pleaded for more money to combat the escalating epidemic and global travel fears mounted.

As the death toll from the world's worst-ever outbreak of the virus shot past 4,500, a glimmer of hope came from Senegal, which was declared Ebola-free by the World Health Organization.

The United States, meanwhile, named an "Ebola czar" to coordinate its response, after criticism of how a Texas hospital handled a Liberian victim, with two nurses who treated him now infected.

And a researcher at British pharmaceuticals giant GlaxoSmithKline said a vaccine may not be ready for commercial use until late 2016.

"We are losing the battle," World Bank chief Jim Yong Kim warned, blaming a lack of international solidarity in efforts to stem the epidemic.

"Certain countries are only worried about their own borders," he told reporters in Paris.

As of October 14, 4,555 people have died from Ebola out of a total of 9,216 cases registered in seven countries, the WHO says.

Most of the dead are in three West African nations at the centre of the outbreak: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Experts warn that the infection rate could hit 10,000 a week by early December.

'Very serious problem'

The United Nations has warned that it has received less than 40 percent of the nearly \$1 billion it asked for to fight Ebola.

So far, just \$377 million has come in, and another \$217 million has been pledged, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said.

"But that's not money in the bank," OCHA spokesman Jens Laerke told reporters in Geneva.

And a UN trust fund for Ebola has just \$100,000, despite \$20 million in pledges—a situation UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said had left the world body with a "very serious problem."

"We need to turn pledges into action. We need more doctors, nurses, equipment, treatment centres and medical evacuation capacities," he said.

Travel fears

Despite enhanced health checks at airports in several countries, fears mounted, and Air France flight attendants called for an end to flights to Guinea, one of the three hardest-hit nations in West Africa.

The daily Air France Paris-Conakry flight "carries a serious risk of spreading the epidemic, particularly in our country," read a statement from the two unions of flight crew and commercial staff.

France will on Saturday start carrying out health checks on travellers arriving from Guinea. The United States, Britain and Canada have already launched screenings at airports for passengers from Ebola-hit zones. The EU is reviewing the matter.

In the United States, health authorities were still facing questions about how the disease—which kills around 70 percent of those it infects in West Africa—had spread at a Texas hospital.

Other questions surfaced about the safety protocols in place for those who came in contact either with a Liberian man who died of Ebola at the hospital, or the two infected nurses who treated him.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has expanded the number of airline passengers it wants to interview after the second nurse, Amber Vinson, flew from Dallas to Cleveland and back before being diagnosed.

And another Texas health care worker who may have come in contact with samples from the Liberian Ebola victim has voluntarily quarantined herself aboard a cruise ship in the Caribbean.

Although that woman is considered at "very low risk" of infection, according to Carnival Cruise Lines, the ship was apparently denied entry at ports in Belize and Mexico, and was headed back to the US.

The US State Department deputy spokeswoman, Marie Harf, told reporters at a briefing that the ship, now en route to Galveston, Texas, is due to dock on Sunday.

Symptoms of Ebola include fever, headache, diarrhoea, vomiting and in some cases bleeding.

Even if a person is infected, the virus can only be passed on once symptoms appear and only through direct contact with their bodily fluids, such as mucus, semen, saliva, vomit, stool or blood.

Influx of doctors

The WHO is ramping up its efforts to help 15 African countries defend themselves against Ebola—notably with measures to better protect health workers, who are paying a heavy price, with 236 deaths out of 427 cases across the affected countries.

The East African Community bloc comprising Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania announced it was sending more than 600 health workers to Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

And US Secretary of State John Kerry offered a rare praise to Cuba, which has sent 165 health care workers and plans to send 300 more to battle the outbreak.

A string of health workers have been evacuated back to Europe from Africa with Ebola, but the only confirmed case of transmission on the continent so far is a Spanish nurse in Madrid.

Glimmers of hope

Health authorities held up Senegal as a shining example of success in an otherwise dire global outlook on Ebola.

"Senegal's response is a good example of what to do when faced with an imported case of Ebola," the WHO said, lauding the government for having "reacted quickly to stop the disease from spreading".

Nigeria, where 20 people were infected and eight died, is expected to be declared Ebola-free on Monday. But neither is out of danger.

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