

Liberia, Mali see crucial gains in Ebola fight (Update)

November 11 2014, by Orind Cooper

Liberia has announced a dramatic drop in new Ebola infections as Mali prepared to lift quarantine restrictions on dozens of people put at risk of exposure to the deadly virus.

Liberian assistant health minister Tolbert Nyenswah said new cases had dropped from a daily peak of more than 500 to around 50, confirming tentative announcements by experts worldwide of an apparent slowdown in the epidemic.

"It's not the number of Ebola cases we were reporting two months ago.... The numbers of cases are reducing," he told AFP late Monday, adding however that there were still new cases emerging across the country.

The largest Ebola outbreak on record has killed some 5,000 people, with Liberia hit hardest and the contagion still raging in neighbouring Sierra Leone and Guinea.

The World Health Organization (WHO) said late Monday that it had released from isolation 25 of more than 100 people thought to have come into contact with Mali's sole case.

The victim, a two-year-old girl from Guinea, was diagnosed with Ebola after journeying to the western town of Kayes on October 23 and died the following day.

The toddler had travelled by bus and taxi with her grandmother, sister

and uncle, making frequent stops on a trip of more than 1,200 kilometres (750 miles).

They also spent two hours in the capital Bamako, visiting relatives in a house of 25 people.

When Malian authorities became aware of the case, they mounted an emergency response helped by the WHO, US experts and several aid organisations, identifying 108 contacts.

'Growing confidence'

These included fellow bus passengers found as far away as France and Senegal, and 33 health care workers, the WHO said in a statement.

"Of the 108 contacts, 25 have been followed for 21 days and have been released from the surveillance system," it added.

"Seventy-nine contacts were at the hospital where the child was treated and in the Kayes community. All have been monitored.

"To date, no one has shown signs of Ebola or tested positive for the disease."

Abdoulaye Nene Coulibaly, a doctor in the medical team sent to lead the response, said everyone in isolation in Kayes would be released Tuesday if they were still showing no symptoms.

The WHO said there was growing confidence that Ebola would not spread within Mali, adding that the toddler "had haemorrhagic symptoms but no diarrhoea or vomiting during her travels".

There was good news in the United States too, where health officials said

Craig Spencer, a 33-year-old New York doctor who became America's last known Ebola case, had been cured and released from hospital.

The US has treated nine victims of the virus, which spreads through contact with infected bodily fluids.

The White House has been at the forefront of the international response to the outbreak, committing hundreds of millions of dollars and announcing plans for Ebola treatment units across Liberia.

The first US-built centre opened on Monday in Tubmanburg, around 70 kilometres (45 miles) northwest of Monrovia.

'Still skyrocketing'

Gorbee Logan , a health officer for the area, put the drop in cases down to efforts to raise awareness of Ebola within communities across the country and better investigation of outbreaks.

"A lot more case-finding, contact-tracing, case investigation and surveillance activities—all of these have helped," he said.

The claim chimes with the advice of global medical aid agency Doctors Without Borders, which has called for a more localised response focusing on the deployment of rapid response teams to new outbreaks.

The organisation launched an online training programme on Tuesday aimed at helping aid workers involved in fighting the outbreak.

It said the training platform was "available to anyone wishing to gain a basic understanding of the virus and how it can be contained".

In Sierra Leone, WHO spokeswoman Winnie Romeril said the outbreak

had stabilised in some areas but was "still skyrocketing" in the west of the country.

While Kenema, the eastern city at the epicentre of the epidemic, has not recorded new cases for three weeks, the capital Freetown and the nearby town of Hastings are still battling a serious outbreak, she told AFP.

She said the official nationwide death toll of 1,133 was a gross underestimate and the real caseload was likely five times the official figure.

"It's not a cover-up by authorities, (it's) just people don't report their cases. This is a serious problem—they want to keep the bodies and organise traditional burials," she said.

The Gambia, which remains Ebola-free, announced Tuesday it had reopened its land borders to travellers from Sierra Leone and the other Ebola-hit nations.

But Morocco was stripped of hosting the Africa Cup of Nations and flung out of the competition after insisting that it wanted to postpone the tournament due to fears over Ebola.

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