

Mali battles new Ebola outbreak as cleric, nurse die (Update)

November 12 2014, by Serge Daniel

Mali scrambled Wednesday to prevent a major Ebola outbreak after the deaths of an Islamic cleric who brought the killer virus in from neighbouring Guinea and the nurse who treated him.

The case has dashed optimism that Mali was free of the highly-infectious pathogen and caused alarm in the capital Bamako, where the imam was washed by mourners at a mosque after his death.

The city's Pasteur clinic has been quarantined, with around 30 people trapped inside, including medical staff, patients and 15 African soldiers from the United Nations mission in Mali.

Teams of investigators are tracing health workers, scouring the capital and the imam's home district in northeastern Guinea for scores of people who could have been exposed.

The deaths have raised fears of widespread contamination as they were unrelated to Mali's only other confirmed fatality, a two-year-old girl who had also arrived from Guinea in October.

A doctor at the clinic is thought to have contracted the virus and is under observation outside the capital, the clinic said.

A friend who visited the imam has also died of probable Ebola, the World Health Organization (WHO) said.

Mali's health ministry called for calm on Wednesday, as it led a huge cross-border operation to stem the contagion.

Locals said many patients fled the clinic following the announcement late on Tuesday of the death of the nurse who treated the cleric.

The WHO said the 70-year-old, named as Goika Sekou from a village on Guinea's porous border with Mali, fell sick and was transferred via several treatment centres to the Pasteur clinic.

'Many mourners at risk'

He had travelled to Bamako by car with four family members—all of whom have since got sick or died at home in Guinea.

Multiple lab tests were performed, the WHO said, but crucially not for Ebola, and he died of kidney failure on October 27.

The imam's body was transported to a mosque in Bamako for a ritual washing ceremony before being returned to Guinea for burial in his home village.

Traditional African funeral rites are considered one of the main causes of Ebola spreading, as it is transmitted through bodily fluids and those who have recently died are particularly infectious.

"Although these events are still under investigation, WHO staff assume that many mourners attended the ceremonies," the agency said.

Although the imam cannot now be tested, his first wife died of an undiagnosed disease last week while his second wife and brother are sick at an Ebola treatment centre in southern Guinea where his son tested positive for the virus on Tuesday.

All were with him on the car journey to Bamako, the WHO said, adding that his daughter died in Guinea on Monday.

The WHO said 28 health care workers who had contact with the imam at the Pasteur clinic had been identified and were under observation.

A second team of investigators is scouring Bamako, including the mosque, for possible infections while WHO staff in Guinea trace the man's family history.

The nurse who died treating Sekou, identified by family as 25-year-old Saliou Diarra, was the first Malian resident to be confirmed as an Ebola victim.

Sierra Leone cases 'skyrocketing'

Mali's first case, two-year-old Fanta Conte, died after travelling to the western town of Kayes 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 Bamako, visiting relatives in a house of 25 people.

Mali had announced this week that it was planning the release of more than 100 people who may have had contact with the girl, and voiced confidence that it had beaten Ebola.

Almost 5,000 people have been killed by the virus in the west African outbreak according to the WHO, which says the true scale of the epidemic could be much greater.

The virus is estimated to have killed around 70 percent of its victims,

often shutting down their organs and causing unstoppable bleeding.

Ebola emerged in Guinea in December, spreading to neighbouring Liberia and then Sierra Leone, infecting at least 13,000 people.

Cases are "still skyrocketing" in western Sierra Leone, according to the WHO, although Liberia says it has seen a drop in new cases from a daily peak of more than 500 in September to around 50.

Others have been identified, though on a much smaller scale, in Nigeria, Senegal, Spain and the US.

The last known person in the US with Ebola, 33-year-old doctor Craig Spencer, has recovered and been released from hospital.

A total of 289 people in New York continue to be monitored for possible symptoms, including Spencer's fiancée and staff who helped treat the doctor.

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