

Targets being met against 'stupid' Ebola, claims WHO

December 1 2014, by Alice Ritchie

Key targets to reduce the spread of Ebola by isolating patients and burying bodies safely have been reached in Liberia and Guinea but have been missed in Sierra Leone, the World Health Organization said Monday.

Assistant Director-General Bruce Aylward said it was "meaningful progress", and proved that "you can catch up with Ebola, even on this scale".

He acknowledged that an increase in cases in Sierra Leone meant the country had not reached the much-touted goal of having 70 percent of Ebola patients in isolation beds by December 1.

But he said he expected this to happen in the "coming weeks", insisting the national figure was skewed by the new outbreak in the west of the country.

The WHO is now looking at how to step up its efforts to trace people who had close contact with Ebola victims, with a goal of halting the epidemic by mid-2015.

Aylward warned against complacency, saying: "There is no room for optimism when you are dealing with the Ebola virus. It's not about low numbers, it's about zero."

The WHO set a 60-day target on October 1 to isolate 70 percent of

Ebola patients in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone and ensure safe burials for 70 percent of bodies, which are highly infectious.

The organisation's own figures last week indicated that neither Sierra Leone nor Liberia would meet the isolation target, but Aylward said the data was incomplete.

He insisted that despite fears of the outbreak there, "prognosis for Sierra Leone is actually very good".

Palo Conteh, the head of Sierra Leone's government Ebola response unit, told reporters in Freetown: "We did not do badly in the past 60 days.

"In some areas, we achieved 100 percent... safe burials but we did not do well in isolation as we needed bed capacity."

The WHO estimated last week that the country needed 1,209 treatment centre beds by December 1, while just 356 beds were available.

'Stupidest of viruses'

Improvements in Liberia mean that the number of cases across the three west African countries was fairly stable, from 1,000 a week in early October to 1,100 now, the WHO said.

"The challenge now that the disease numbers have fallen (in Liberia) was to shift from the sense of being hunted by this virus to actually hunting it down," Aylward said.

This meant scaling up the number of people involved in contact tracing, from 5,000-6,000 currently to 20,000, including 350-400 international WHO staff.

"To get to zero you have to find every single case," he said.

One favourable aspect of Ebola is that "this is one of the stupidest viruses" due to the short time in which it can be spread and the clear path it follows, which means it can be tracked from person to person, he said.

But he urged the international community not to lose interest.

Of the \$1.55 billion pledged for the Ebola fight, about \$920 million had been delivered. The shortfall meant that in some areas, "a lot of things have been done on the cheap", he said.

Another target—100-100-90, for 100 percent isolation of patients and 100 percent safe burials by January 1—will be "challenging" to meet, Aylward said.

He warned that in Liberia there were signs of "a sense of complacency setting in".

And he said the geographical spread of the virus in Guinea was worrying, having jumped from nine prefectures on October 1 to 16 today, aiding transmission to Mali.

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