

# UN says several months needed to control Ebola

December 11 2014, by Edith M. Lederer

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The U.N. Ebola chief said Thursday it will take several more months before the outbreak in West Africa is under control, an assessment that makes clear the World Health Organization's goal of isolating 100 percent of Ebola cases by Jan. 1 won't be met.

Dr. David Nabarro said there has been "a massive shift" over the last four months in the way affected governments have taken the lead in responding to the epidemic, communities are taking action and the international community has pitched in.

But he said greater efforts are needed to combat Ebola in western Sierra Leone and northern Mali, to reduce the number of new cases in Liberia and to limit transmission to Mali.

WHO conceded that it didn't meet an interim Dec. 1 target of isolating 70 percent of Ebola patients and safely burying 70 percent of victims in hardest-hit Sierra Leone. But it hasn't made clear what that means for its Jan. 1 goal, which it set in September. It has acknowledged that its patchy data could compromise the goal, since the agency does not know how many Ebola patients there actually are and is unable to track all of their contacts.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said last month the outbreak might not be contained until sometime next year.

"We must be prepared for ups and downs, difficulties and successes,"

Nabarro told a meeting promoting greater collaboration between the U.N. and the business community in responding to Ebola. "And it's going to take, I'm afraid, several more months before we can truly declare that the outbreak is coming under control."

More than 18,100 people have been infected and more than 6,500 have died in West Africa since the initial case in Guinea a year ago, in an area bordering Sierra Leone and Liberia. Unlike previous Ebola outbreaks, which had been confined to faraway villages in the rain forests of Central Africa, this one quickly spread to capital cities in all three West African nations and has become the worst in history.

The outbreak is now stabilizing in Liberia and Guinea but continues to spread rapidly in Sierra Leone, where Nabarro said the country's president is leading "an intensified surge operation" in the capital Freetown and hard-hit western areas.

"It will come under control—it's, I think, a matter of weeks," Nabarro said.

In Sierra Leone on Thursday, President Ernest Bai Koroma implored the country's traditional leaders to stop cultural practices blamed for spreading Ebola, including funerals that involve touching corpses that are highly contagious.

Koroma said he hoped to end all Ebola transmissions in the next 21 days, but that goal seems unrealistic in a country where 400 to 500 cases a week have recently been reported.

Nabarro said the U.N. and experts responding to the outbreak are also disturbed by the 10-20 new cases daily in Liberia and want the number reduced to zero.

"When we dissect what is happening, it looks like ... about a hundred miniature outbreaks are still going on," Nabarro said. "They are much less intense in most of the region."

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Citation: UN says several months needed to control Ebola (2014, December 11) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-12-months-ebola.html>

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