

# WHO 'wasted precious time' over Ebola: expert

December 3 2014, by Frankie Taggart

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The Belgian microbiologist who co-discovered the Ebola virus has accused the World Health Organization of dithering in reacting to the deadly epidemic and accused the international community of "hysteria."

Peter Piot said that while an initial delay in confirming the outbreak could be expected, there was no excuse for waiting a further five months before acknowledging the extent of the crisis.

"It took three months for the WHO to find out there was an Ebola outbreak. That I understand. Guinea had a poor laboratory infrastructure," he told Doha-based broadcaster Al Jazeera in an interview due to air on Saturday.

"I have much more of a problem with the fact that it took five months for WHO—for the international health regulations committee, for that's what it is—to declare this a state of emergency.

"It took a thousand dead Africans and two Americans who were repatriated to the US because they were infected. There's no excuse for that... It took too long, we wasted too much precious time."

Authorities in Guinea and the WHO said on March 24 that since January the west African country had recorded 87 suspected cases of viral haemorrhagic fever, including 61 deaths.

Scientists studying samples in the French city of Lyon confirmed it was

Ebola.

But the WHO didn't declare the outbreak a "[public health emergency](#) of international concern" until August 8.

Piot said the slow response to crisis was compounded by a United States-led over-reaction, according to an Al Jazeera statement quoting from the interview sent to AFP in Dakar.

## 'Epidemic of mass hysteria'

"There is an epidemic of Ebola in west Africa and then there is a second epidemic, an epidemic of [mass hysteria](#) that we saw particularly in North America," said Piot, director of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

"It was really out of proportion with the issue."

He pointed to a controversial decision by the governors of New York and New Jersey ordering quarantine for healthcare workers returning from west Africa.

"Of course, people have become infected. One nurse has become infected in Texas, but you know, putting people in quarantine who return from west Africa for 21 days—as some US states are imposing—doesn't make sense from a [public health](#) perspective," he said.

"It's not cost-effective and also it's a major deterrent and disincentive for supporting the countries in west Africa."

He said the response to Ebola needed to address both the lack of robust healthcare systems and the cultural habits and belief systems prevalent in the affected countries.

"You need people who speak the language, who understand the culture, who know what people think and feel," he said.

The Ebola outbreak ravaging west Africa has claimed 6,070 lives, according to the latest WHO update, with the vast majority of deaths in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone.

Piot, who co-discovered the virus in 1976 in Zaire, now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, talks of his part in the achievement, which he describes as "the highlight of my life".

"It's a dream of every microbiologist to discover a new virus," he says.

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