

Ebola mistakes should serve a lesson says WHO

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The World Health Organization's chief admitted on Sunday that the UN agency had been caught napping on Ebola, saying it should serve as a lesson to avoid similar mistakes in future.

Despite turning the corner in the fight against Ebola, there was no room for complacency, WHO head Margaret Chan told a rare emergency session of the agency.

Chan acknowledged blistering criticism that WHO's response to the epidemic had been slow and shoddy and called for a revamp of its crisis management techniques.

"This was west Africa's first experience with the virus and it delivered some horrific shocks and surprises," she said.

"The world, including WHO, was too slow to see what was unfolding before us," she told delegates at only the third emergency session in the history of WHO.

"The data tell us we have bent the curve and avoided the worst-case scenario," she said.

"Ebola is a tragedy that has taught the world, including WHO, many lessons also about how to prevent similar events in the future," she said.

"The volatile microbial world will always deliver surprises," she said.

"Never again should the world be caught by surprise, unprepared."

Chan told AFP that "the priority in 2015 is to help countries get the Ebola rate down to zero."

The worst outbreak of the virus in history has seen nearly 9,000 deaths in a year—almost all in the three west African countries of Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone—and sparked a major health scare worldwide.

But "an upsurge in new cases can follow a single unsafe act or burial or violent act of community resistance," Chan said.

She called for a "dedicated contingency fund to support rapid responses to outbreaks and emergencies", the need to enhance crisis management in the heart of the WHO, better international coordination and surveillance, and a "far more rigorous methodology for evaluating these capacities".

"Countries must be supported to have their own workforce for responding to emergencies, trained and drilled to perform with military precision," she said.

'Strong, speedy response'

David Nabarro, the UN's Ebola coordinator, said "responses must be strategic, strong and speedy" in the future.

He said the outbreak showed up "weaknesses in the global institutional machinery for identifying and quickly neutralising health hazards."

Nabarro however noted a string of generous contributions in both funds, expertise and help in building up the creaky health infrastructure of the worst-hit countries, singling out Britain, China, France, the United States

as well as the African Union and the west African regional bloc ECOWAS.

The WHO came in for criticism from delegates at the conference.

"Too many times the technical is overruled by the political in WHO, we have to revise that," said Tom Frieden, the director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The conference also heard from Sierra Leonean nurse Rebecca Johnson, who survived the disease after a four-week treatment in December.

Johnson said she could not walk or talk and nearly went blind.

"But I have recovered my sight," she said.

Despite her recovery, Johnson said she was "stigmatised and am still stigmatised by some people in my community."

"I sometimes go to a (lonely) place and cry," she said, but ended her speech with a message of hope.

"Ebola is not the end of the world. Ebola can be beaten."

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