

UN reports significant drop in Ebola cases

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The deadly Ebola epidemic is slowing significantly in the three west African countries at its epicentre, the World Health Organization said Wednesday, adding that those countries were now adequately equipped to stem the tide.

The UN health agency said in its latest update that a total of 8,626 people had died as of January 18, almost all of them in west Africa, since the epidemic broke out in December 2013. There were 21,689 confirmed cases.

But decrypting the figures revealed rare good news in the worst ever outbreak of the disease which sparked a health scare the world over.

"Case incidence continues to fall in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone," the WHO said. Liberia, for instance, which had a peak over 300 new cases per week in August and September, only notched up eight last week.

The UN agency also said the three hardest-hit countries which have a creaky health infrastructure and were struggling to deal with the epidemic were now adequately equipped largely thanks to international help.

They now have "sufficient capacity to isolate and treat patients," it said.

The three countries have borne the brunt of the epidemic, representing 99 percent of the total deaths from the haemorrhagic virus.

'Sufficient capacity to bury'

Each country now also had "sufficient capacity to bury all people known to have died from Ebola," the WHO said.

Traditional funeral practices involving close contact with the corpse had dramatically upped the transmission rate in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Moreover the three countries now were able to monitor between 89 and 99 percent of registered contacts on a daily basis, the WHO said, adding that there were 27 laboratories there providing case information services.

Hailing the dramatic fall in the [transmission rate](#), the update said there were only 20 confirmed cases in Guinea last week against 45 the week before.

The figure for Sierra Leone was 117 last week against 184 a week ago, it said, but added that the west of the country remained a problem area with the capital Freetown accounting for 30 of last week's cases.

Mali, which along with Senegal and Nigeria had a minor Ebola scare, was able Monday to declare itself Ebola-free after 42 days without any new cases.

Senegal and Nigeria had previously already done so.

In other good news, the World Bank shaved its estimates of the economic damage of the Ebola epidemic Tuesday, but warned that the three main affected countries would still bear a heavy cost.

After warning last October that the outbreak could wreak \$25 billion in economic losses across all of west Africa, the bank said that with Ebola now broadly contained, the total could run to \$6.2 billion.

However, the epidemic "will continue to cripple the economies of Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone even as transmission rates in the three countries show significant signs of slowing," it said.

Experts reviewed the Ebola crisis on Tuesday at an emergency meeting called by WHO in Geneva. They recommended the continuation of exit screening for people leaving the worst-hit [countries](#) but at the same time underscored the need "to avoid unnecessary interference with international travel and trade."

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