

WHO chief announces shake-up of organisation after Ebola shock

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The World Health Organization will dramatically reform its emergency response operations this year, its chief said Monday, after the UN agency faced blistering criticism for its slow Ebola response.

WHO Director General Margaret Chan told the agency's decision-making body in Geneva that she had decided to make some "fundamental changes" to help the organisation respond more quickly and efficiently in times of crisis.

"I do not ever again want to see this organisation faced with a situation it is not prepared, staffed, funded or administratively set up to manage," Chan told some 3,000 delegates from 180 countries gathered for the annual World Health Assembly.

WHO has faced a barrage of criticism for responding far too slowly to the west African Ebola outbreak, which since it began in late December 2013 has infected nearly 26,800 people and killed more than 11,000 of them.

"The world was ill-prepared to respond to an outbreak that was so widespread, so severe, so sustained and so complex," Chan said.

She acknowledged that WHO had been "overwhelmed" by the outbreak, which had placed demands on the organisation that were "more than 10 times greater than ever experienced in (its) 70-year history."

WHO today has nearly 1,000 staff on the ground in Ebola-ravaged Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Chan said WHO staff would remain in the three countries "until the job, including the recovery of (their devastated) essential health services, is done."

To ensure that the agency will be better prepared next time disaster strikes, Chan said she had called for the creation of a \$100-million contingency fund, "financed by flexible voluntary contributions", to ensure money will be available to respond immediately.

WHO will also establish a joint programme for health emergencies, which will report directly to Chan, and which will include clear performance metrics "showing what must happen within 24, 48 and 72 hours, not months," she said.

The new programme will also coordinate a new global [health](#) emergency workforce, called for during a rare emergency session of WHO's executive board in January, she said.

The skills of WHO's emergency staff will also be boosted with the addition of logisticians, medical anthropologists and experts in risk communication, Chan said.

Shoddy communication and a lack of understanding of the traditions and customs of people living in local communities has been blamed for widespread community resistance to efforts to isolate patients and ensure safe burials of highly infectious bodies, which slowed down the fight against the virus and even opened some aid workers up to attack.

The reforms will not be cheap.

Chan has proposed a 10-percent hike in the 2016-17 budget, bringing it to \$4.4 billion, with \$236 million going towards WHO's surveillance and response capabilities.

"The Ebola outbreak shook this organisation to its core," she said, but she added she hoped the reforms would help give WHO "new relevance and empower it to lead in [global health](#)".

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