

Some 30 nations have dangerously weak health systems: WHO

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About 30 countries have health systems that are as dangerously weak as the ones that allowed Ebola to ravage Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the World Health Organization warned Thursday.

The UN health agency stressed the urgency of learning the lessons drawn from the outbreak that has killed more than 11,100 people in west Africa, calling for strengthening health systems so they can rapidly detect and counter looming disasters.

"We must reverse the trend in global health where we wait for the fire to flare up, run to put it out but then forget to fireproof the building," said senior WHO official Ruediger Krech.

The world, he told reporters, had to create a health system "built to withstand shocks whether from an outbreak like Ebola, a natural disaster or a financial crisis."

The fragile health systems in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia, weakened by conflict and poverty, were an important factor in Ebola's rapid spread through the three countries last year.

And Krech said at least 28 other countries worldwide, mainly in Africa, but also in Asia and Latin America, had similarly weak systems.

The list includes Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Burundi, Sudan, Afghanistan and Haiti.

"So our work will not be limited to west Africa," he said.

The Ebola outbreak began in late 2013 in Guinea, but was permitted to spread silently for three months before the WHO and the region raised the alarm.

The crisis sparked a global health scare, with the humanitarian response especially gaining momentum once stray cases were detected in the United States and some European countries.

Liberia, once the worst-hit country, was declared Ebola-free on May 9. But Krech said the crisis was far from over in the two neighbouring countries and refused to give a timeframe for them to acquire a similar status.

On Wednesday, the WHO's annual decision-making assembly approved a significant hike in its budget for 2016-17 to among other things help strengthen health systems in west Africa and elsewhere.

Just pouring in money will not fix the problem, Krech warned, adding that "corruption is rife in many countries."

"The elephant in the room" in many nations with poor health systems is endemic corruption and a lack of transparency of how funds are spent in key sectors such as health, he told AFP.

"To further complicate things, the private health sector in many countries is unregulated," he said.

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