

WHO needs urgent change to tackle health crises: experts

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The World Health Organization (WHO) is unprepared to deal with crises like the Ebola outbreak and requires fundamental change, supported by an increase in funding, experts warned Tuesday.

More than 11,000 people have died from the highly infectious Ebola virus in the past 18 months, most of them in the west African countries of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, where it continues to claim lives.

In a critical report, a UN-appointed panel of independent experts said the WHO was too slow in declaring a global public health emergency on August 8, 2014, five months after the outbreak had taken hold.

It "tends to adopt a reactive, rather than a proactive approach to emergencies" and failed to act on the warnings of experienced staff on the ground, the panel said.

In the early months of the crisis, Director-General Margaret Chan and senior staff also failed to show the "independent and courageous decision-making" required to deal with governments of the countries affected, it said.

The panel also criticised the WHO's early engagement with local communities about what could be done to reduce the spread of Ebola, and its failure to provide authoritative information on what was happening.

In Guinea, it said, communities are still not convinced of their own responsibilities with regard to declaring contact with infected patients and ensuring victims are safely buried, making it difficult to eliminate the virus.

"The panel is convinced that WHO must make fundamental changes, particularly in terms of leadership and decision-making processes, in order to deliver on this mandate," the report concluded.

"But it will also require the resources and political will of the member states to make WHO the agency that can fulfil this mandate in the 21st century. This transformation must be carried out urgently."

Short of funds

The panel declined to call for any resignations at the WHO, and warned that part of the problem was that its purchasing power had fallen by one third since 2000.

"You cannot expect an organisation to be taking on more and more of these global outbreaks and yet have a declining budget at the same time," said Barbara Stocking, the head of the panel and former head of development agency Oxfam.

Her team recommended that regular member state contributions be increased by five percent and called for a separate \$100 million (92 million euros) emergency contingency fund.

It said the WHO should set up a new emergency centre to respond to and manage global crises, a move that was preferable to creating a dedicated UN mission for each emergency, as occurred with Ebola.

The experts also welcomed plans to train more rapid response staff,

which the WHO says are already underway.

Other factors also contributed to the slow global response, however, including the failure of countries to properly prepare for health outbreaks and their reluctance to declare possible epidemics.

The panel proposed some form of financial incentive for countries to declare health emergencies such as an insurance system to help with economic losses.

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