

WHO chief calls for urgent transformation of global epidemic response

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The World Health Organization chief acknowledged Monday that the response to the West African Ebola outbreak fell far short, calling for an urgent overhaul of the international response to epidemics.

"We need to put in place corrective strategies just as quickly as possible," WHO Director-General Margaret Chan told a committee created to review why existing international health regulations failed to prevent the deadly Ebola outbreak.

A decade ago, 194 countries around the world agreed to a set of legally binding regulations on how to "prevent, protect against, control and provide a public health response to the international spread of disease".

But the latest Ebola epidemic, which has claimed some 11,300 lives in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone and 15 elsewhere, has laid bare that the world remains unprepared to face international health emergencies, Chan said, according to a written version of her statement.

"National and international responses (to the Ebola outbreak) show how far the world is from achieving global health security," she said, acknowledging that WHO and others were "overwhelmed" and missed important warning signals.

Overall, the response provided "a stunning example of all that was missing, all that can go wrong," she said, insisting "change is urgently needed."

Ebola circulated undetected in Guinea for three months after it first surfaced there in December 2013. Even in neighbouring Sierra Leone, where health officials were on high alert, the virus spread undetected for at least a month, allowing it to take hold.

Chan warned though that the three West African countries were not the only nations in the world with "extremely weak health systems and infrastructures," leaving many nations vulnerable to the rapid spread of disease.

In fact, fewer than a third of countries meet the minimum international requirements for building core capacities to detect and respond to health events, Chan said, describing the overall compliance situation as "dismal".

And the lack of preparedness could have even more dire consequences if faced with a disease that spreads more easily than Ebola, which is transmitted only through contact with body fluids of a person already showing symptoms of the disease, she warned.

Ebola "was not a worst-case scenario," she said, stressing that "preparedness for the future means preparedness for a very severe disease that spreads via the airborne route or can be transmitted during the incubation period, before an infected person shows tell-tale signs of illness."

The Ebola disaster, which "should have left an indelible mark on the world's collective conscience," could meanwhile spur action to transform the world's response to [health](#) emergencies, Chan said.

She urged the new committee, which met for the first time Monday, to propose changes to the regulations to make it easier for countries to comply, including offering assistance to the nations at highest risk.

She also insisted that WHO should be handed a way to enforce compliance with the regulations.

The committee's final conclusions are expected by next May.

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