

WHO chief heads to DR Congo over latest Ebola outbreak

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The head of the World Health Organization was due in DR Congo on Saturday to aid preparations for "all scenarios" in combatting the latest Ebola outbreak.

"WHO director general Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus is on his way to the Democratic Republic of the Congo to assess the needs of the response first-hand. We are preparing for all scenarios," the UN health agency said in a statement.

The outbreak in the region northeast of Kinshasa near the border with the Republic of Congo has so far killed 18 people around the town of Bikoro in Equateur province, according to the WHO.

A report from the provincial council of ministers, seen by AFP, said there were "three suspected cases" in the region's capital Mbandaka, which has 700,000 inhabitants.

WHO's head of emergency response Peter Salama said Friday getting aid to the affected area was "extremely challenging" given its remoteness and lack of infrastructure.

"We know the number of suspected, probable and confirmed cases is significant. We are very concerned and we are planning for all scenarios, including the worst case scenario," he said.

DRC health ministry Ebola responders have been dispatched to the

affected area with a joint WHO and UNICEF team following.

"We are about to go to Bikoro after this stop at (regional capital) Mbandaka where we began the deployment of mobile labs to start analyses" of suspect cases," Eugene Kabambi, leading the WHO communications team in DR Congo, told AFP Saturday, adding his team hoped to obtain results swiftly.

He said Health Minister Oly Ilunga had alerted local people to the ongoing risk.

The WHO has made \$1 million (842,000 euros) available to stop the virus spreading, judging that risk was "high," a representative of the UN's humanitarian affairs agency OCHA told reporters Friday.

DR Congo has endured nine known outbreaks of Ebola since 1976, when the deadly viral disease was first identified in then Zaire by a Belgian-led team.

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