

Congo approves use of experimental Ebola vaccine, WHO says

May 14 2018, by Saleh Mwanamilongo And Jamey Keaten

Congo has agreed to allow the World Health Organization to use an experimental Ebola vaccine to combat an outbreak announced last week, the WHO director-general said Monday.

The aim is for health officials to start using the vaccine, once it's shipped, by the end of the week, or next week if there are difficulties, said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

"We have agreement, registration, plus import permit—everything formally agreed already. And as you know that vaccine is safe and efficacious and has been already tested. So I think we can all be prepared," he said. "All is ready now, to use it."

The outbreak was announced last week in Bikoro, in Congo's northwest. Health officials traveled there after Congo's Equateur provincial health ministry on May 3 alerted them to 17 deaths from a hemorrhagic fever.

As of May 13, Congo has 39 suspected, probable and confirmed cases of Ebola since April, including 19 deaths, WHO reported. Two cases of Ebola have been confirmed.

Congo's Ministry of Health has requested that WHO send 4,000 doses of the vaccine, said ministry spokeswoman Jessyca Ilunga, who said they should arrive by the end of the week.

"The vaccination campaign starts next week, everything depends on the

logistics because the vaccine must be kept at minus 60 degrees Celsius, and we need to assure that the cold chain is assured from Geneva to Bikoro," she said.

The Ebola vaccination campaign will first target health workers, Ilunga said. Three nurses are among those with suspected cases, and another is among the dead.

The teams on site have already identified more than 350 contacts, who are people who have had contact with the patients, she said.

Mobile laboratories were deployed to Mbandaka and Bikoro on Saturday, she said, adding that results from the first 12 samples tested with that method should be available tomorrow.

This is the ninth Ebola outbreak in Congo since 1976, when the deadly disease was first identified. Congo has a long track record with Ebola, WHO said. The last outbreak that was announced a year ago, was contained and declared over by July 2017.

None of these outbreaks was connected to the massive outbreak in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone that began in 2014 and left more than 11,300 dead.

There is no specific treatment for Ebola, which is spread through the bodily fluids of people exhibiting symptoms.

The new experimental vaccine, developed by the Canadian government and now licensed to the U.S.-based Merck and has been shown to be highly effective against the virus. It was tested in Guinea in 2015.

Though the Congo outbreak is of a different strain, the experimental vaccine is still thought to be safe and effective.

WHO chief Tedros had led a delegation to the affected region on Sunday.

The Bikoro health zone is about 150 kilometers (93 miles) from Mbandaka, the capital of the Equateur province, and 45 kilometers (28 miles) from Ikoko Impenge, where there are other suspected cases.

WHO is working with Congo's government and other international organizations, including Medecins Sans Frontieres, to strengthen coordination to fight and contain the Ebola outbreak.

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