

Experts call for emergency declaration on Congo's Ebola

February 4 2019, by Carley Petesch



Ebola virus particles (red) on a larger cell. Credit: NIAID

An international group of public health experts on Monday called on the

World Health Organization to convene an emergency committee to consider declaring Congo's Ebola outbreak an international public health emergency.

The group of experts wrote in the Lancet that such a call would help galvanize "high-level political, financial, and technical support to address the Ebola outbreak that started last May."

The outbreak, declared just over six months ago in Congo's east, is the country's tenth and the world's second largest recorded. Instability, dense populations, political instability and mass displacement have contributed to the spread of the disease.

"The epidemic is not under control, and has a high risk of spread to the region, perhaps globally," said lead author Lawrence Gostin, faculty director of Georgetown University's O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law.

The experts pointed specifically to concerns of Ebola spreading to nearby countries such as South Sudan, which they say is among the most fragile states in the world with far less capacity to control an Ebola outbreak.

"Taking bold measures to prevent the spread of the disease in this country where violence is prevalent, and a famine is predicted, is critical to preventing a humanitarian disaster," Gostin said.

The experts argue that the criteria for declaring an international emergency have been met, including public health impact, novelty and scale and movement of people.

The World Health Organization on Monday responded that the WHO and its partners in Congo and neighboring countries continue to closely

monitor the situation for signs that an expert committee meeting would be needed.

"If and when we see those signs, the director general will call a meeting," said WHO spokesman Tarik Jasarevic.

The first meeting of the Emergency Committee, charged with making the call of a public emergency, took place Oct. 17.

The call to attention comes as, six months on, Ebola has spread to 18 health zones in Congo, and though many initial hotspots have been contained, new ones have popped up in recent weeks.

Despite their call Monday, however, the group of experts also warned that a declaration of an international public health emergency may also have negative consequences, such as a ban on trade or travel barriers in Congo. So it also called on the WHO and United Nations to "take active steps to prevent unlawful and harmful restrictions including calling out countries that violate laws designed to prevent this sort of unwarranted action," according to Gostin.

In October, the emergency committee determined that it was particularly important that no international travel or trade restrictions be applied, and neighboring countries accelerate their preparedness and surveillance.

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