

UN chief: Ebola cases in Mali a 'deep concern'

November 21 2014, by Harry Dunphy

The United Nations chief warned Friday that Ebola may be easing in part of West Africa but is still hitting hard in other areas and outpacing the international response.

"If we continue to accelerate our response we can contain and end the outbreak by the middle of next year," U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, calling for continued funding and especially health workers to volunteer in the region.

Authorities are closely watching a new front in the outbreak, a cluster of cases in Mali linked to the death of a 70-year-old Muslim imam who was brought to Mali's capital, Bamako, from neighboring Guinea—and health officials didn't immediately recognize that he had Ebola.

"The new chain of transmission in Mali is a cause of deep concern," Ban said. He dispatched World Health Organization Director-General Margaret Chan to Mali on Friday.

Anthony Banbury, who heads the U.N. fight against Ebola in West Africa, told the U.N. Security Council that Ban ordered his mission to immediately establish a presence in Mali "to stop the disease where it is before it spreads further."

Chan said nearly 500 people are being monitored in Mali as authorities try to snuff out a second introduction of Ebola there. Six deaths have been recorded there, five in connection to the imam and one unrelated

death last month.

In Mali, "we have to really move with speed and scale and have a no-regret policy" in working to contain the disease, Chan said.

Chan cautioned against complacency throughout the region, where Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea have been hardest-hit.

Banbury warned by videoconference of "a long battle" to defeat the deadly disease, which has also spread to new hotspots in northern Guinea and western Sierra Leone.

He said the number of new cases weekly is declining or stabilizing, with 55 percent of known cases isolated and 87 percent of burials being carried out safely, but he stressed that many cases are still unreported.

Despite this important progress, Banbury said, "we are far, far away from ending this crisis."

"It's clear that more must be done to bring this crisis under control—much, much more," Banbury said. "Having a declining overall caseload was very hard. Getting it down to zero is going to be much, much harder."

"We are deep in the midst of this Ebola crisis, a very dangerous crisis that poses today and will pose tomorrow a very serious threat to ... the countries that are now affected as well as other countries throughout the world," he said.

Banbury called for "a tremendous increase in resources" especially in rural areas where mobile, rapid response teams and facilities are needed to respond to new outbreaks and get ahead of the disease.

Dr. David Nabarro, the U.N. Ebola chief, said the U.N. needs \$600 million to meet the estimated \$1.5 billion it needs to combat Ebola until March. He said skilled health workers are also needed, especially in remote districts, "to chase down and root it out from the last hiding place."

The Security Council adopted a presidential statement expressing grave concern at "the unprecedented extent of the Ebola outbreak" and reiterating that the disease constitutes "a threat to international peace and security." It asked the U.N. mission to scale-up the U.N. mission's response in rural areas and strengthen coordination with governments, regional groups and NGOs to identify gaps in fighting the disease.

National Institutes of Health infectious diseases chief Dr. Anthony Fauci echoed the no-complacency message in separate remarks Friday, saying researchers are "going full-speed ahead" in the hunt for vaccines and treatments.

"Just because numbers are going down in a particular country is no reason to think that we have won this battle," Fauci said at the National Press Club in Washington.

One vaccine candidate is set to start clinical trials in West Africa at the beginning of the year, after results of a small first-stage study at the NIH proved promising.

"It looks good. There aren't any adverse events. We've shown that the immune response looks good," Fauci said.

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