WHO considering global health emergency over DRC Ebola outbreak

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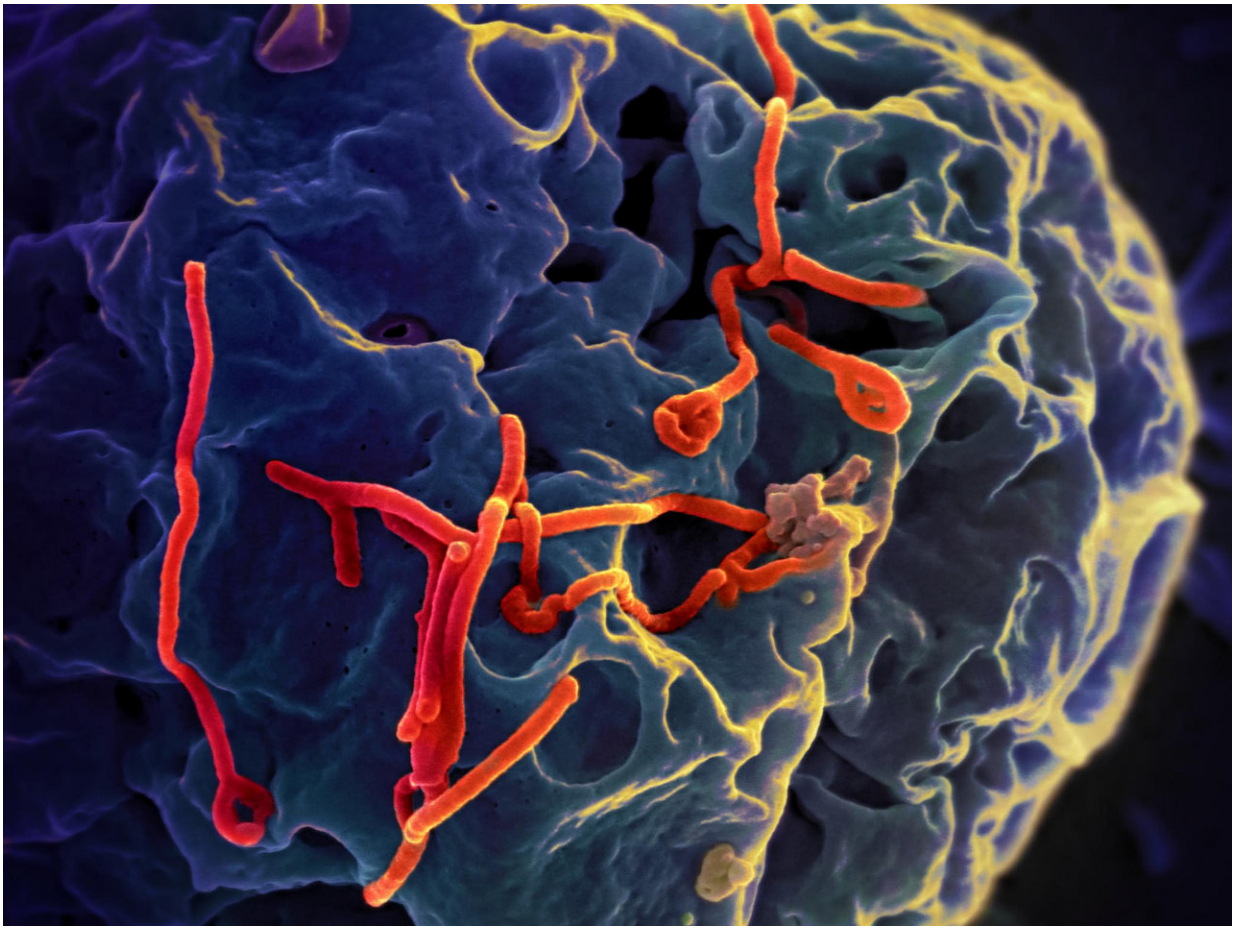

Ebola virus particles (red) on a larger cell. Credit: NIAID

The World Health Organization said Monday its experts will meet this

week to determine whether an Ebola outbreak in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo constitutes a global health emergency.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has convened "an emergency committee" on the current outbreak in DRC's violence-torn North Kivu region, which has killed 135 people since August, the UN health agency said in a statement.

"The committee will meet on October 17 in Geneva to ascertain whether the outbreak constitutes a public health emergency of international concern," the statement said.

In the WHO's parlance, "a public health emergency of international concern" is an "extraordinary event" in which a disease may spread across borders and requires a vigorous international response.

The agency first invoked the emergency mechanism in 2009 when a new strain of influenza, so-called H1N1 swine flu, emerged.

It was also declared twice in 2014, when polio re-emerged after the disease was nearly eradicated, and after an Ebola epidemic struck three West African countries.

Then in 2016, a global emergency was declared in response to an outbreak of the Zika virus.

Monday's announcement came after DRC Health Minister Oly Ilunga warned over the weekend that a second wave of the Ebola virus had been confirmed in the outbreak in North Kivu, which is home to a clutch of armed groups.

He said the second wave occurred as a result of community resistance to measures taken to tackle the disease, describing the outbreak as "high

risk."

"The situation is worrying," he said.

Fears and misconceptions about the virus have led to widespread mistrust and resistance to Ebola response workers, including those who come into communities wearing hazmat suits to orchestrate burials.

A staff member of the UN peacekeeping mission MONUSCO was among the latest victims of the virus, the UN and DRC health ministry said.

The latest outbreak—the 10th in DR Congo since Ebola was first detected there in 1976—so far counts 211 confirmed and probable cases of the virus, including 135 deaths.

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