

Deadly Ebola stirs mayhem in Lagos

Lagos, Thursday

WHEN Liberian-American Patrick Sawyer collapsed at Lagos airport, he brought Ebola into a potentially ideal place for the deadly virus to spread - a vast, dirty, overcrowded city where tracing carriers and their contacts is a major problem.

Sawyer's arrival last month from Liberia - which along with Sierra Leone and Guinea lies at the center of an outbreak that has killed more than 1,000 people - caught authorities in the Nigerian commercial capital unprepared.

By the time they realized where he was from or what illness he had, Sawyer had had contact with dozens of people. Lagos has now had 10 cases of Ebola, an illness spread by contact with the fluids of an infected person.

As Africa's biggest economy, Nigeria has a better health system than the other west African countries

which are among the poorest in the world, and Ebola doesn't spread through the air or water supply as with many other epidemic diseases.

But health experts - who are trying to overcome superstition and public ignorance about Ebola as well as the disease itself - say there is now only a short opportunity to find and lock down other infected people before the outbreak in the city of 21 million gets out of hand.

"Lagos is big, it's crowded. It would make in many ways a perfect environment for the virus to spread," said Nigerian epidemiologist Chikwe Ihekweazu, who runs website Nigeria Health Watch and worked on Ebola in South Sudan a decade ago.

"In the heart of Lagos, people live on top of each other, sharing bedrooms and toilets. In densely populated communities infection control becomes almost impossible to do well."