

By The Guardian Correspondent

FOLLOWING the World Health Organisation's (WHO) declaration that the spread of Ebola in West Africa constitutes an international health emergency, the Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN) has appealed to the UN bodies, governments, Aid

Agencies and Civil Society Organisations to do more to demystify the causes of the outbreak and help communities understand that it is not caused by witchcraft.

At least 932 deaths have been blamed on the illness, with 1,711 reported cases of Ebola in Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone in this latest outbreak.

However, the true figure is likely to be much higher as

many cases in rural areas go unreported.

A lack of access to public health facilities in such communities often leads to victims consulting witchdoctors or pastors whose "cure" may focus on identifying and treating the "spiritual" cause of the medical conditions rather than prescribing their rational scientific explanations and treatment.

Belief in witchcraft and the effectiveness of traditional medicine is prevalent in West Africa, particularly the remote rural areas where the outbreak has been concentrated.

It is common for diseases such as HIV/Aids, epilepsy and tuberculosis to be considered as signs of witchcraft in this region and for victims to seek assistance from faith and community leaders to cure such illnesses.

According to a statement by the WHO "The possible consequences of further international spread of Ebola are particularly serious in view of the virulence of the virus, the intensive community and health facility transmission patterns, and the weak health systems in the currently affected and most at-risk countries."

WHO officials said a coordinated international

response was essential to stop and reverse the spread of the virus.

The announcement came after experts convened a two-day emergency meeting in Switzerland.

In response, Gary Foxcroft, Executive Director of WHRIN stated: "If the WHO and partners are to contain this latest outbreak they need to use all media tools at their disposal to send

a strong message to communities that Ebola is not a mysterious disease and that it is not caused by witchcraft."

Rather, it is an infectious disease with a rational, scientific explanation of how it was created, how it is spread and how it can be treated.

There is a huge amount of work that needs to be done to demystify the medical conditions, such as Ebola, that are commonly associated with

witchcraft across West Africa. Unfortunately, failure to do so may lead to this latest epidemic spreading".

The link between medical conditions and belief in witchcraft has been documented in various and non-governmental organisation reports.

However, as yet there has been no concerted and coordinated action to address this challenge.