

Ebola outbreak could have 'catastrophic' consequences

Monrovia, Saturday

FEAR over Ebola is growing as international leaders and health organizations struggle to try to stop the deadly epidemic in West Africa.

The Ebola outbreak "is moving faster than our efforts to control it," Margaret Chan, director-general of the World Health Organization, said in a statement Friday. "This is an unprecedented outbreak accompanied by unprecedented challenges. And these challenges are extraordinary."

This is the first Ebola outbreak in West Africa and involves the most deadly strain in the Ebola virus family, Chan said.

"If the situation continues

to deteriorate, the consequences can be catastrophic in terms of lost lives but also severe socioeconomic disruption and a high risk of spread to other countries."

One of those countries could be the United States, health officials have said. In fact, the U.S. Department of State announced Friday that it is working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to bring home two U.S. citizens who have been infected by Ebola in Liberia.

As of Sunday, the World Health Organization had confirmed 909 cases and 485 deaths in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria. It suspects that there may have been up to 1,323 cases and 729 deaths.

"The outbreak is by far the largest ever in the nearly four-

decade history of this disease," Chan said. "It is the largest in terms of numbers of cases and deaths. ... It is the largest in terms of geographical areas already affected and others at immediate risk of further spread."

CDC Director Tom Frieden said Thursday that it could take three to six months to stop the epidemic

First of all, there are no vaccines for Ebola. So health officials have to stop the infection by isolating patients to prevent further transmission.

Past outbreaks have primarily occurred in rural areas, where people were not frequently traveling and infecting others. This outbreak has made it to several of the region's major cities, including Freetown, Sierra Leone; Monrovia, Liberia; and

Conakry, Guinea.

These cities have international airports, which opens up the possibility of infected patients traveling abroad. For example, American Patrick Sawyer became infected with Ebola in Liberia and traveled via plane to Lagos, Nigeria, where he died. Health officials are still tracing all the people he came in contact with along the way.

The outbreak is "taking place in areas with fluid population movements over porous borders, and it has demonstrated its ability to spread via air travel, contrary to what has been seen in past outbreaks," Chan said.

"Cases are occurring in rural areas which are difficult to access, but also in densely populated capital cities."