

Emergency food drops eyed for quarantined Ebola region of W.Africa

WASHINGTON

INTERNATIONAL agencies are looking into emergency food drops and truck convoys to reach extremely hungry people in Liberia and Sierra Leone, who are cordoned off from the outside world to halt the spread of the Ebola virus, a top World Bank official said on Thursday.

Hunger is spreading fast as farmers die leaving crops rotting in fields. Truckers scared of the highly infectious disease halt deliveries. Shops close and major airlines have

shut down routes, isolating large swathes of the countries.

The Mano River region, home to about 1 million people and an epicenter for the deadly disease, is a major concern and the issue was raised on Wednesday with U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, said Tim Evans, senior director for health at the World Bank.

"There has been a lot of inflation in food prices and a lot of difficulty in getting food to the quarantined population," he said in an

interview.

The World Bank, along with the UN and the World Health Organisation, is urgently assessing how to make emergency food deliveries, or they face the danger of a deepening health crisis from malnutrition and the spread of other diseases, he said.

"This is emerging as an important part of the immediate response," Evans said. "We are looking at exactly what the needs are and where, and then looking at

how we contribute to making sure that food gets to the right places."

Meanwhile, the United Nation's World Food Programme said it has declared Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone - the three countries reeling from over 1,000 deaths from Ebola - a Level Three food emergency, its highest threat. It is urgently mobilising teams to get food into the area and prevent widespread hunger and deaths.

"We are pulling out all the

stops," said Steve Taravella, WFP spokesman in Washington.

His agency already is extraordinarily stretched. Never before has it faced six top-level emergencies all at once - in Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, Cameroon, Central African Republic and now the Ebola hit-countries.

"It is a dramatic, profound situation," he said.

For West Africa, the stability of the whole region is at stake if hunger and disease spread uncontrolled, said

Evans.

"It certainly is a threat to national security," he said, stressing that a comprehensive response is needed.

But for Nigeria, the World Bank director expressed optimism it has acted promptly to contain spread of the Ebola by reaching those who came into contact with its first victim there.

"It suggests at this point that it is relatively contained," he said.

Longer term, the Ebola

outbreak has exposed the danger from chronic underfunding of national healthcare systems and the need to invest in regional laboratories to test and manage infectious diseases, he said.

Most countries fell far short of a 2000 pledge, known as the Abuja Declaration, to devote 15 percent of their budgets to healthcare. The World Bank "absolutely" expects more lending for health in the years ahead, Evans said.