

Liberia fights Ebola in capital as West Africa toll tops 1,200

MONROVIA/GENEVA

LIBERIA battled on Tuesday to halt the spread of the Ebola disease in its crowded, run-down oceanside capital Monrovia, recording the most new deaths as fatalities from the world's worst outbreak of the deadly virus rose above 1,200.

The epidemic of the hemorrhagic disease, which can kill up to 90 percent of those it infects, is ravaging the three small West African states of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, and also has a toehold in Nigeria, Africa's biggest economy.

As the Geneva-based World Health Organization rushed to ramp up the global response to the outbreak, including emergency food deliveries to quarantined zones, it announced that deaths had risen to 1,229 as of Aug. 16, out of 2,240 cases.

Between Aug. 14 and 16, Liberia recorded the most new deaths, 53, followed by Sierra Leone with 17 and Guinea

with 14.

On a more hopeful note, the WHO expressed "cautious optimism" that the spread of the outbreak in Nigeria could be stopped. Four deaths were recorded in Africa's most populous nation out of 12 confirmed cases between July and Aug. 16.

It also described the situation in Guinea, where the virus made its first appearance in West Africa in December, as currently "less alarming" than in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The virus was transferred to Nigeria by a U.S. citizen, Patrick Sawyer, who arrived by plane from Liberia.

Nigerian Health Minister Onyebuchi Chukwu reported late on Tuesday a fifth Ebola death in that country. The victim was a female consultant doctor who had treated Sawyer. WHO said the situation in Lagos looked "reassuring". However, Cameroon closed its borders with Nigeria on Tuesday as a precaution.

The WHO said it was working with the U.N.'s World Food Programme to ensure food delivery to one million people living in Ebola quarantine zones cordoned off by local security forces in a border zone of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

"Providing regular food supplies is a potent means of limiting unnecessary movement," it said in a statement.

Besides infection in border zones, Liberia is fighting to stop the spread of the virus in the poorest neighbourhoods of its capital, such as the West Point slum where at the weekend a rock-throwing crowd attacked and looted a temporary holding centre for suspected Ebola cases, 17 of whom fled.

The government imposed a nationwide curfew between 9 p.m. (2100 GMT) and 6 a.m. in an effort to curb the disease, which is spread by contact with the bodily fluids of infected persons, it said in a statement on state radio.