

MONROVIA/GENEVA

LIBERIA struggled on Monday to track down 17 suspected Ebola carriers who fled quarantine at the weekend, while the U.N. health agency urged affected West African nations to screen all departures in a bid to contain the worst outbreak of the virus.

In the Liberian capital Monrovia, police awaited a consignment of protective equipment before redeploying to West Point - a sprawling ocean-front shantytown - to reopen a quarantine centre attacked by a rock-throwing crowd on Saturday, allowing patients, who had been isolated, to get away.

"We are very, very concerned about the situation," Information Minister Lewis Brown said, adding that 17 patients were still missing from the centre, which was thoroughly looted.

"The police had to stand down

because they were concerned not to put their men at risk. They got a supply of protective equipment yesterday and my expectation is that they will redeploy today."

With its healthcare system and government infrastructure struggling to cope, Liberia has been the country hardest-hit by the highly infectious and incurable disease, which has killed 1,145 people in four West African countries.

Officials and healthcare workers met community leaders in West Point in an effort to reopen the converted school.

Residents told Reuters they were angry that President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's government had brought people infected with the virus to their community. Many voiced fears that Saturday's looting would spread contamination through the neighbourhood of corrugated shacks separated by

narrow, muddy alleys.

"It felt bad. These people have put themselves at risk and the entire community at risk," said Molly Cooper, leader of a local women's association.

Residents also voiced anger that patients had been kept without sufficient food and water - chiming with concerns that measures in neighbouring Sierra Leone and Liberia to quarantine affected communities could lead to a humanitarian crisis.

The World Food Programme has said it would step up food shipments to some 1 million people at risk of hunger after roadblocks and quarantine measures were imposed in remote border area between Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

With international agencies scrambling to control the epidemic, medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF)

opened a 120-bed treatment site in the ELWA hospital on the outskirts of Monrovia - the biggest-ever such centre. The hospital already has an 80-bed Ebola facility and the aim was to reach a total of 300 beds, Minister Brown said.

A team of 11 Ugandan healthcare workers have also opened a treatment centre in the JFK hospital in Monrovia with 34 beds in a ward usually used for cholera treatment, the minister said.

SIGNS OF IMPROVEMENT

The World Health Organization (WHO) told countries affected by the outbreak to screen people departing at international airports, seaports and major land border points and stop any with signs of the virus from travelling. It dismissed the need for any further travel restrictions.

