

WHO declares Ebola epidemic a global emergency

GENEVA

THE World Health Organisation yesterday declared the killer Ebola epidemic ravaging parts of west Africa an international health emergency and appealed for global aid to help afflicted countries.

The decision after a two-day emergency session behind closed doors in Geneva means global travel restrictions may be put in place to halt its spread as the overall death toll nears 1,000.

The WHO move comes as US health authorities admitted on Thursday that Ebola's spread beyond west Africa was "inevitable", and after medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) warned that the deadly virus was now "out of control" with more than 60 outbreak hotspots.

WHO director-general Dr Margaret Chan (pictured below) appealed for greater help for the countries worst hit by the "most complex outbreak in the four decades of this disease", echoing an earlier claim by MSF that the "epidemic is unprecedented in terms of geographical distribution, people infected and deaths".

States of emergency

"I am declaring the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern," Chan said, stressing the "serious and unusual nature of the outbreak".

Even as a possible new case was reported in the east African country of Uganda, she said only a small part of the continent had been affected. "This alerts the world to the need for high vigilance," she said.

The suspected victim in Uganda was stopped on arrival at the country's main Entebbe airport after showing signs of fever on a flight from war-torn South Sudan. Ugandan health ministry spokesman Rukia Nakamatte said on Friday that they were awaiting results of tests for the disease.

In another worrying development, Benin -- to the west of the main affected countries -- said it had placed two patients with Ebola-like symptoms in isolation and was waiting for test results to establish if the pair were infected.

Ebola has claimed at least 932 lives and infected more than 1,700 people since breaking out in Guinea earlier this year, according to the WHO.

States of emergency were in effect in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone.

Soldiers in Liberia's Grand Cape Mount province -- one of the worst-affected areas -- set up road blocks to limit travel to the capital Monrovia, as bodies reportedly lay unburied in the city's streets.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf said people should expect certain rights to be suspended as the country imposes "extraordinary measures" necessary for "the very survival of our state".

In Sierra Leone, which has the most confirmed infections, 800 troops were sent to guard hospitals treating Ebola patients, an army spokesman said.

Two towns in the east of Sierra Leone, Kailahun and Kenema, were put under quarantine and nightclubs and entertainment venues across the country were ordered shut.

'Africans should get new drug'

