

Ebola outbreak: Deadly epidemic declared international public health emergency by WHO

World Health Organisation takes stand as experts predict it will take 'three to six months' to end outbreak

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The deadly Ebola epidemic that has ripped through West Africa has been declared an international health emergency by the World Health Organisation (WHO). WHO's director general Dr Margaret Chan said the current outbreak is the "most severe and most complex" in the nearly four decades of the history of the disease on Friday.

The committee's decision on declaring the international state of emergency was "unanimous" Dr Chan said, adding that the declaration "alerts the world to the need for high vigilance of possible cases of Ebola," though she acknowledged that many countries would not be affected by the virus.

Dr Chan said the announcement is a "clear call for international solidarity" over the outbreak, which is the largest and longest in history.

"Countries affected to date simply do not have the capacity to manage an outbreak of this size and complexity on their own," Dr Chan said. "I urge the international community to provide this support on the most urgent basis possible."

WHO added that while all countries with Ebola transmission, namely Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, should declare a national emergency, there should be no general ban on international travel or trade.

The decision comes as a Spanish missionary infected with the virus while working in Liberia became the first case to be treated in Europe after he was flown home on Thursday, after the Liberian president declared a state of emergency over the outbreak that has killed nearly 1,000 people in West Africa, and is thought to have infected around 1,700.

Liberian soldiers have now set up a blockade to stop people from the affected western regions entering the capital of Monrovia, while Sierra Leone has imposed a complete blockade of eastern areas suffering from Ebola.

There is no licensed treatment or vaccine for Ebola and the current death rate has reportedly been around 50 per cent.

Dr Keiji Fukuda, the organisation's head of health security, reiterated that the severity of the outbreak has been down to fragile health systems and serious lack of human, financial and material resources in the countries that are currently affected, but stressed that with the right steps, the spread of the infection can be stopped.

"This is not a mysterious disease. This is an infectious disease that can be contained. It is not a virus that is spread through the air," he said.

The organisation has asked medical ethics experts to explore the possibility of offering experimental drugs to Africans next week, after two US charity workers who were infected in Liberia and are now being treated in a specialist isolation unit in Atlanta, America, appear to be improving after receiving the drugs.

Health experts have stressed that it is not yet known whether the drugs are helping their apparent recovery or not.

In the United States, Dr Tom Frieden, the director of the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, told Congress that ending the Ebola crisis will be a "long and hard fight," and said it would take at least three to six months to end the outbreak, adding that this time frame would be a best-case scenario.

Samaritan's Purse's vice president Ken Isaacs said a huge problem in curtailing the outbreak will be persuading African communities to abandon their traditional rituals when people have died, which involves washing the body and kissing the corpse immediately after death, which is when it is most infectious.

Aid workers have been attacked when trying to intervene in these processes, he added.

(617 words)