



Ebola emergency meeting establishes new control centre

Last week, a WHO crisis meeting on the ongoing Ebola outbreak in west Africa promised to improve collaboration between the affected countries. Andrew Green reports.



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West African governments and international health groups have pledged to better coordinate their response to the ongoing Ebola outbreak in west Africa—the largest outbreak in history. Some humanitarian groups have warned that the current outbreak, which started in March and has killed more than 450 people in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, is in danger of spiralling out of control.

In early July, WHO representatives called an emergency meeting in Accra, Ghana, with ministers of health from those three nations, along with eight other countries from the region that risk seeing the virus cross their borders.

Luis Sambo, WHO's regional director for Africa, described the result as "an inter-country strategy to tackle this outbreak", which has so far suffered from the difficulty of coordinating a response across three countries. That has allowed the epidemic to become the "largest in terms of the number of cases and deaths, as well as geographical spread", he said.

As of July 7, more than 750 confirmed or probable cases had been reported across the region. Ahead of the 2-day meeting, Bart Janssens, the director of operations with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), warned that the aid group had "reached our limits". MSF has treated more than 500 patients since the outbreak began, but "despite the human resources and equipment deployed by MSF in the three affected countries, we are no longer able to send teams to the new outbreak sites".

The governments and WHO pledged to create a sub-regional control centre in Guinea, which will allow for greater cooperation between the different ministries and groups involved in the response.

At the same time, the governments pledged to scale up disease

surveillance, which is often lacking in rural communities with limited health facilities.

Governments will also renew their emphasis on educating community and religious leaders about how Ebola is transmitted, so that they can encourage people in their areas to be more vigilant in stopping the spread of the disease.

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The virus is transmitted through contact with a contagious person's bodily fluids. People who are infected initially suffer from headaches, fevers, and muscle pain, before the onset of vomiting and diarrhoea. Ebola can eventually lead to severe haemorrhaging after vital organs are blocked.

West Africa is currently dealing with the most deadly subtype of the virus—the Zaire strain—which can kill up to 90% of people who are infected. There is no cure or vaccine.

Sambo has warned that some traditional practices could be facilitating the transmission of Ebola. "The continuing spread of the Ebola virus during this outbreak is in great extent associated with some cultural practices and traditional beliefs, which are contrary to recommended public health preventive measures", he said.

WHO specifically highlighted the practice of ritual washing at traditional funerals, which can bring people into close contact with the bodies of Ebola victims. Community leaders will encourage people to take precautions when preparing people for burial or allow health workers to do it instead.

Better awareness about the disease could also help allay the climate of fear and suspicion the epidemic has created and allow aid workers to do their jobs, said Armand Sprecher, a specialist in haemorrhagic fevers working with MSF. Among some communities, he said, there is a perception that health workers are coming to harvest blood or steal organs, "which makes it difficult to gain their trust and to trace contacts".

The Red Cross announced earlier this month that it was forced to suspend its activities in southeast Guinea after local men threatened staff members with knives.

Health workers face other problems. The outbreak started in Guinea near the country's border with Liberia and Sierra Leone, but soon spread to the capital, Conakry. WHO has cited the spread of the virus to crowded urban centres as one of the key challenges in curbing the outbreak.

Another is that infected patients have been able to easily cross the nation's porous borders into Sierra Leone and Liberia—and possibly other countries in the regions. "The current trend of this epidemic and the potential of cross-border and international spread constitute a public health matter of grave concern", Sambo had warned at the outset of the emergency meeting.

Along with the control centre, delegates to the talks agreed to convene national committees and organise cross-border consultations, in a bid to improve coordination.

Staff at the new control centre will be responsible for raising the money needed to fund containment and treatment efforts, although there was no immediate promise of new funding from the international community.

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