

Beat: Health

Death toll from Ebola outbreak in West Africa reaches 467

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USPA News - The death toll from the Ebola outbreak in West Africa has risen to 467 after more than 120 suspected cases were reported over the past few days, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Tuesday as it prepared to hold an emergency meeting to combat the epidemic. An updated report from the World Health Organization showed the overall death toll from Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone has increased to 467, up significantly from the 399 fatalities reported in the previous update on Thursday.

The total number of cases increased from 635 on Thursday to 759 on Monday. The latest figures were released a day ahead of an emergency meeting in Accra, Ghana, that will be attended by the health ministers of eleven countries as well as the World Health Organization, the United Nations (UN), and other aid agencies such as Doctors Without Borders (MSF). Also attending the meeting are Ebola survivors and representatives of airlines that serve West Africa. "The objective of the meeting is to analyze the situation, identify gaps, develop operational response plans, and to ensure increased political commitment and enhanced cross-border collaboration for Ebola response activities among the countries in the sub-region," WHO said. When it announced the meeting last week, the organization warned that "drastic action" is needed to bring the Ebola outbreak under the control. "This is no longer a country specific outbreak but a sub-regional crisis that requires firm action by Governments and partners," Dr Luis Sambo, WHO Regional Director for Africa, said at the time. Sambo said there is an urgent need to intensify response efforts and to promote cross-border collaboration and information sharing after a significant increase in new cases over the last month. "WHO is gravely concerned of the on-going cross-border transmission into neighboring countries as well as the potential for further international spread," he said. The outbreak features the Zaire strain of the Ebola virus, which is considered the most aggressive and deadly strain, killing more than 9 out of 10 affected on average. Since the initial outbreak in Guinea in March, the virus has also spread to neighboring countries Liberia and Sierra Leone, making it the first international outbreak of the virus. With now 759 suspected and confirmed cases in the region, including 467 deaths, the outbreak is the worst ever of its kind. The vast majority of cases have been reported in Guinea, where authorities have seen 413 cases including 303 deaths. Sierra Leone has reported 239 cases, including 99 deaths, while Liberia reported 107 cases, including 65 deaths. Doctors Without Borders, which is also known by its French name Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), issued a warning last week that the outbreak is "out of control." MSF, the only international aid organization that is treating people affected by the deadly Ebola virus, called on regional governments and aid agencies to prepare a "massive deployment of resources" to bring the outbreak under control. "The epidemic is out of control. With the appearance of new sites in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, there is a real risk of it spreading to other areas," Dr. Bart Janssens, MSF director of operations, said on June 23. "We have reached our limits. 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." MSF and its more than 300 staff members, with more than 40 tons of equipment and supplies, have treated more than 470 Ebola patients in specialized treatment centers since the outbreak began, but the organization is having difficulty responding to the large number of new cases emerging in different locations. Ebola is a highly infectious disease and kills its victims in a very short time, though the virus can easily be confused with many other diseases. The signs and symptoms include high grade fever, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, headache, measles-like rash, red eyes, and in some cases bleeding from body openings. The virus, for which there is no cure or vaccine, can spread through direct contact with body fluids such as saliva, blood, stool, vomit, urine, and sweat but also through soiled linen used by an infected person. It can also spread by using skin piercing instruments previously used by an infected person or by touching the body of a person who died of Ebola. The first outbreak of Ebola in 1976 in Zaire - which is now the Democratic Republic of Congo - had been the deadliest until the current outbreak, killing at least 280 people and sickening 38 others, putting the fatality rate at 88 percent. The Ebola outbreak in Uganda in 2000 had long been the largest ever recorded, killing 224 people and sickening at least 201 others.

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