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WHO raises high Ebola health risk in DR Congo

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WHO said health workers had identified 430 people who may have had contact with the disease and were working to trace more than 4,000 contacts of Ebola patients who had spread across north-west DR Congo.



The World Health Organization (WHO) is to hold an emergency meeting to discuss the risk of Ebola spreading from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A panel will decide whether to declare a “public health emergency of international concern,” which would trigger a larger response.

At least 44 people are believed to have been infected in the current outbreak and 23 deaths are being investigated, reports BBC.

Cases emerged in a rural area with one now confirmed in the city of Mbandaka. Mr Salama, the WHO's deputy director-general for emergency response, said Mbandaka's location on the Congo river raised the prospect of Ebola spreading to Congo-Brazzaville and the Central African Republic, as well as downstream to Kinshasa, which has a population of 10 million.

"This puts a whole different lens on this outbreak and gives us increased urgency to move very quickly into Mbandaka to stop this new first sign of transmission," he said.

The 2014-16 West Africa outbreak became particularly deadly when it spread to the capitals of Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

WHO says that of the 44 Ebola cases reported, three are confirmed, 20 are probable, and 21 are suspected.

They were recorded in Congo's Equateur province. Mbandaka is the provincial capital.

Mr Salama said that isolation and rudimentary management facilities had been set up in Mbandaka.

He said the disease could have been taken there by people who attended the funeral of an Ebola victim in Bikoro, the south of Mbandaka, before travelling to the city.

On Wednesday more than 4,000 doses of an experimental vaccine sent by the WHO arrived in Kinshasa with another batch expected soon.

These would be given as a priority to people in Mbandaka who had been in contact with those suspected of carrying the Ebola virus before people in any other affected area, Mr Salama said.

The vaccine, from pharmaceutical firm Merck, is unlicensed but was effective in limited trials during the West Africa outbreak. It needs to be stored at a temperature of between -60 and -80 C. Electricity supplies in Congo are unreliable.

WHO said health workers had identified 430 people who may have had contact with the disease and were working to trace more than 4,000 contacts of Ebola patients who had spread across north-west DR Congo.

Many of these people were in remote areas, Mr Salama said.