

Nabarro urges vigilance as Ebola outbreak shows signs of easing in Liberia

Encouraging signs that the Ebola epidemic in Liberia is easing must not lead to an easing of the international effort to fight the disease, the Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Ebola told reporters Friday.

“Stay vigilant, keep up the focus, maintain the drive,” said Dr. David Nabarro. “Sustain the effort until every last case is identified and treated, because – until then – this Ebola outbreak poses a threat to affected countries, to the region and to the global community.”

Nabarro said the figures for the number of cases in Liberia “certainly look quite exciting right now because there are suggestions that the outbreak curve is not showing a continued increase in the way we saw during September and early October.”

But he said weekly reports from the field do not always contain the full data, “so we are checking to see whether or not the data are a reflection of what’s actually happening.”

And even if the apparent decrease in the rate of cases is confirmed, “this does not mean the outbreak is under control.”

A single case can result in many others, he noted.

But the data do suggest that the strategy being pursued is the right one, “and we must continue to work very hard and effectively,” he said.

That hard work is expected to require the help of several thousand medical personnel, many of them volunteers from abroad, for the duration of the effort, he said.

Their willingness to help could be jeopardized by restrictions on their return to their countries of origin, said Nabarro, who urged that officials be guided by science in setting policy.

“There is no scientific basis to restrict the travel of workers who’ve been giving service in the affected countries and there’s no scientific basis for putting them in quarantine, unless there is the suggestion that they might have Ebola,” he said, citing the assertion by the World Health Organization that people with Ebola are not infectious unless they have symptoms of the disease.

And he urged that those who do contract the virus be given proper support free of stigmatization.

Nabarro’s view was supported by comments made Friday by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. “I have expressed my strong wish and position that those humanitarian workers who worked in affected countries and who are returning to their countries should not be discriminated” against, he told the BBC.

“The best way to stop this virus is to stop the virus at its source, rather than discriminating ... or quarantining these health workers.”

All possible efforts were being undertaken to ensure that all UN staff responding to the epidemic – whether national or international – have access to necessary care, Nabarro said.

“At the moment we do not have all the elements in place for us to be able to say that everybody is able to have the level of care that we would like them to have, but we are working as effectively and efficiently as we can to get this capacity in place,” he said. “That certainly applies to in-country care and we’d like it to apply to evacuation in case of Ebola infection.”

Nabarro expressed satisfaction with what the United Nations Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) has accomplished in West Africa during its first month of existence, noting the staffing that has surged into the region, and the coordination of efforts by governments, non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, private-sector actors and the public.

Nabarro expressed optimism that UNMEER could achieve the goals of ensuring that 70 per cent of people with Ebola are under treatment and 70 per cent of burials are safe and dignified by December 1.

“We are absolutely on track for achieving them,” he said.

Nabarro praised the public health effort in Nigeria, which was declared Ebola-free this month after mounting a massive effort that included community engagement, good-quality treatment, contact tracing and surveillance.