

Ebola panic fears grow as Spanish nurse fights for life

October 10 2014, by Roland Lloyd Parry, Ingrid Bazinet

A Madrid nurse infected with Ebola fought for her life Friday as authorities worldwide tightened screening of travellers and struggled to prevent public panic over the spread of west African contagion.

Scare stories proliferated as international airport hubs including London and Washington stepped up screening for the disease that has killed nearly 4,000 people, roughly half of all those infected.

People from Australia to Zimbabwe, and from Macedonia to Spain, who exhibited signs of fever or had recent contact with Ebola victims, were whisked into isolation units or ordered to stay in their homes to sit out a 21-day incubation period for the virus.

Authorities warned against hoaxes that could trigger dangerous public panic—as one man did on a US commercial flight Thursday, announcing to fellow travellers he was sick with Ebola.

The United Nations and leaders of the Ebola-stricken nations of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, however, urged world powers to turn their attention back to the African frontline, where a huge increase in aid was needed to stem the lethal tide.

'Stressed' hospital staff

Doctors took in seven more patients for observation late Thursday at Madrid's Carlos III hospital, where nurse Teresa Romero, the first

person to be infected with Ebola outside Africa, was reported to be in a "serious but stable" condition.

A day earlier Romero, who caught the haemorrhagic fever while caring for two infected missionaries back from Africa, was described as at "serious risk" of dying by Madrid's regional leader.

Her husband and 12 other people, most of them medical staff, were also under observation, while a male nurse had been discharged, the hospital said in a statement.

But in a sign of the stress at the ward, where media were camped out awaiting news of Romero, 44, some staff did not show up for work on Friday.

One of the nurses caring for Romero, Charly Manuel Torres, told AFP: "There are fewer staff signing up to help" by providing voluntary extra cover at the hospital.

"We are very stressed. We are working under a lot of pressure."

Alerts abound

In France a public building was briefly evacuated in a Paris suburb on Thursday after a false alert was triggered when an African man felt ill. Earlier, the arrival of a group of schoolchildren from Guinea triggered panic at a French school.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls Friday responded by urging people to avoid triggering hysteria.

"We must be cautious. This caution applies to authorities as well as to the press, so that we do not trigger public panic like [the cases] we have

witnessed," he told journalists.

Spain's police force warned in a Twitter message against Ebola hoaxes, following false reports of infections. "Seek information from trustworthy media and do not spread panic," it said.

The deputy prime minister announced the creation Friday of a "special committee" to handle the Ebola crisis.

In Liberia, which has seen more than 2,000 Ebola deaths including nearly 100 healthcare workers, the government said Friday it had banned journalists from Ebola clinics, arguing it was to protect patients' privacy.

The move came as nurses at the largest government Ebola clinic in Monrovia staged a "go slow" work protest to demand hazard pay, defying a request by UN health authorities to hold back on industrial action during the crisis.

In other Ebola alerts, Macedonia quarantined people who had come into contact with a Briton who died Thursday after exhibiting Ebola-like symptoms of haemorrhaging vomiting. Australia said it had tested 11 people including a Red Cross nurse returned from Sierra Leone, who does not have the disease.

The United States, Canada and Britain have started to boost screening for Ebola at major airports and a training campaign was launched to prepare workers in New York City who may have to deal with infected patients.

A Hazmat team in protective gear was sent aboard a US Airways flight headed from Philadelphia to the Dominican Republic after a man reportedly sneezed, then said "I have Ebola. You are all screwed", and

then said he had returned from Africa.

The flight was halted on the tarmac after landing and, after the man was escorted off, was cleared of biohazard risks.

Prevent the next 'AIDS'

Ebola's spillover into the United States and Europe has raised fears of a wider outbreak.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predicted the number of cases could mount to 1.4 million by January unless strong measures are taken to contain the disease.

At the annual meeting in Washington of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on Thursday, African, US and UN officials entreated donor nations to step up help.

UN Secretary-General Ban said resources to support the fight must be increased 20-fold.

"Cases are growing exponentially," Ban said. "Do not wait for consultation. Just take action."

"We have to work now so that it is not the world's next AIDS," CDC Director Tom Frieden added at the meeting.

"I would say that in the 30 years I've been working in public health, the only thing like this has been AIDS," he added, warning of a "long fight" ahead.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, speaking via video link from Monrovia, said support should include "compensation to healthcare

workers who, for fear of the risk involved, have refused or are reluctant to return to work".

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