

Ebola death toll passes 4,000

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PANIC: Countries scramble to act after Spanish nurse contracts virus in Madrid hospital

MADRID

THE death toll from Ebola has passed 4,000, the World Health Organisation warned, as authorities worldwide tried to prevent panic over the deadly disease and a Spanish nurse fought for her life in a hospital here.

The WHO said 4,033 people had died from Ebola as of Wednesday out of a total of 8,399 registered cases in seven countries. The sharp rise in deaths came as the United Nations said aid pledges to fight the outbreak had fallen well short of the US\$1 billion (RM3.2 billion) needed.

Spanish government officials met yesterday for a gathering of their new crisis committee to tackle the crisis after a nurse became the first person to get infected with the haemorrhagic fever outside of Africa.

They have called for calm and vowed to boost health safety protocol and investigate what failings led to the nurse, Teresa Romero, getting infected.

Almost all the deaths have occurred in west Africa, but after Romero's case, fears had spread beyond that region about the world's worst-ever Ebola epidemic.

The Canadian government advised its citizens on Friday to leave the west African countries hardest hit by Ebola, while taking measures at its own borders to screen for potentially exposed travellers.

The United States and Britain also boosted screening at major airports.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predicted the number of cases could reach 1.4 million by January unless strong measures were taken.

From Australia to Zimbabwe, and Brazil to Spain, people who showed signs of fever or had recent contact with Ebola victims were whisked into isolation units or ordered to stay in their homes.

Serious concerns remained in Spain over how the virus could have spread in a top specialist disease hospital.

Healthcare workers said the quarantine floor of Carlos III hospital



Medical practitioners shouting at Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy during his visit to Carlos III hospital in Madrid on Friday.

here, where 44-year-old Romero was infected, was shut last year as a result of spending cuts and only reopened for the two missionaries flown back from Africa with the disease in August.

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy visited the hospital, where Romero, who caught Ebola while caring for the missionaries, was said to be in a "stable but serious" condition.

Doctors there took in three more patients for observation on Friday, bringing to 17 the number under surveillance, including Romero, her husband and other medical staff.

The UN and leaders of the Ebola-stricken nations of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone pleaded for greater help for the frontline of the disease in Africa.

The president of Guinea, one of the West African nations hard-hit by the Ebola crisis, met with IMF director Christine Lagarde, who promised the organisation was "ready to do more if needed" to fight the disease.

UN deputy secretary-general Jan Eliasson said only a quarter of "the one billion dollars sought" to combat the disease had been pledged. He appealed for doctors, nurses and other healthcare personnel to come forward.

His comments echoed a plea on Thursday from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who said resources to support the fight must be increased 20-fold.

In Liberia, where the official death

toll was put at 2,316 by the WHO on Friday, the government said 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 the capital Monrovia staged a "go slow" to demand hazard pay, defying a request by UN health officials to avoid industrial action during the crisis.

In France, a public building was briefly evacuated in a Paris suburb on Thursday when an African man felt ill. Earlier, the arrival of a group of schoolchildren from Guinea had sparked panic at a French school. Ebola was ruled out in both cases.

Macedonia quarantined people who had come into contact with a Briton who died on Thursday after exhibiting Ebola-like symptoms.

Brazilian health officials quarantined a Guinean man feared to have Ebola, but stressed it was a precautionary measure and the man no longer had a fever or other symptoms.

Britain yesterday held a nationwide exercise to test its preparedness for an outbreak. The eight-hour exercise featured actors pretending to have Ebola plus doctors, nurses and the ambulance service treating them at undisclosed locations around the country.

It was followed by a "simulated" meeting of the government's emergency committee Cobra, the Department of Health said. **AFP**