

Ebola: WHO boss against blanket travel ban

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BY TONY ABET

The leadership of the World Health Organisation (WHO) has called on foreign countries to end blanket travel bans on nations facing Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) outbreaks, saying the measures are ineffective in fighting the epidemic, but have severe effects on these economies.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO director general, made the remarks on Monday during his tour of the Ebola isolation and treatment centre in Mulago National Referral Hospital, Kampala.

"There are some travel restrictions by some countries. Of course, a few countries; the majority are okay. But blanket travel restrictions are wrong. Uganda is reporting transparently. So, travel restrictions blanket actually undermine transparency. We have been asking the international community not to do this," he said.

Dr Tedros appealed to the countries which have banned travellers from affected countries (Uganda and DR Congo) to reconsider their position.

Some of the countries which have announced travel bans or restrictions against Uganda include the USA, UAE and Canada.

"This (travel ban) affects the economy and the livelihoods of the country. When the country is transparent, doing its job, and also has experience in stopping Ebola, I think the return cannot be travel restrictions," Dr Tedros observed.

This appeal from the WHO boss comes a few days after the Permanent Secretary of Uganda's Ministry of Health, Dr Diana Atwine, criticised the international community over the blanket travel ban, saying she feels Uganda is being punished because of the transparency in reporting cases.

International health regulations require countries to declare outbreaks of dangerous pathogens like Ebola and Marburg.

"We feel that Uganda have been a victim of transparency. The more we communicate, the more we are blocked and locked out, the more our citizens are stopped from travel," she said.

"This is unfair, and we request that the international community take this information that our country is capable and tried in managing Ebola," she added.

Dr Tedros said without the travel ban, basic preventive measures can help countries prevent outbreaks or contain outbreaks.

"Many studies have shown that travel restrictions don't actually help...may delay it for a few days or weeks, but ultimately that's not a solution. The remedy is in addressing the disease at the epicentre of the outbreak," she said.

"Ebola needs contact (to spread); it is not like Covid-19. So, with basic precautions, many countries can prevent the case from coming, or they can manage it as soon as possible," he added.

Uganda's Health ministry has reported a cumulative total of 19 confirmed cases in the country (Uganda), with one death as of June 6.

Of this, 14 are imported cases and five Ugandan nationals. Up to five patients have recovered after treatment. In DR Congo, the WHO indicates that there are 432 confirmed cases and 82 confirmed deaths.

Travel restrictions

USA, in its travel advisory for Uganda issued on May 17, placed Uganda at "Level 4 - Do not travel."

"Do not travel to Uganda due to health, crime, terrorism, unrest, and laws targeting persons based on sexual orientation," information from the US State Department reads.

"The US government has limited ability to provide emergency consular services to US citizens in Uganda due to the Health situation," the US added, referring to the May 17 announcement by the WHO, where the Ebola outbreak in the DRC and Uganda was declared as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

On May 18, the US government also said: "In light of the ongoing Ebola out-



The Director of WHO, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (centre), with Christopher Wagobera (right), a medical doctor, during his visit at Mulago National Referral Hospital Isolation Unit. PHOTO / ABUBAKER LUBOWA

TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

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break, the department is temporarily pausing all visa operations at US Embassy Kampala."

The Canadian government also issued a travel alert for Uganda on May 26. "Avoid non-essential travel to Uganda due to the outbreak of Ebola disease, the threat of terrorism, as well as high crime rates," information on the Canadian government's website reads.

DRC-Uganda border restrictions

Dr Tolbert Nyenswah, the director of Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response (PPPR) at the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), said closing borders and restricting the movement of people over Ebola is against AU regulation and international health regulations.

He said with travel advisories, sovereign countries are taking the decisions based on their sovereignty, which is unlawful.

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"Countries should not suffer because there's an outbreak in their country. While the AU-created Africa CDC declared Ebola a public health emergency of continental security, we should not isolate the population but the disease. So, our role here is to be in solidarity with these countries and give them the support that they need to stop this outbreak immediately," he said.

Dr Daniel Kyabayinze, the director of Public Health at Uganda's Ministry of Health, said Uganda instituted border and market restrictions on May 21, where only essential traffic was allowed, and high-risk weekly markets were closed to prevent the spread and importation of Ebola from DR Congo to Uganda.

He said on May 27, as the cases increased, the National Task Force on Ebola tightened the restrictions on the border point by introducing more access limitations of people from the DR Con-

go to further reduce the importation of cases.

Meeting Museveni

While meeting President Museveni on Monday at State House over cross-border collaboration in the Ebola fight, Dr Tedros commended Uganda for the swift response, strong leadership and postponing the Uganda Martyrs' Day celebrations.

"I think that kind of collaboration and cooperation in the neighbourhood will help the cross-border. And that can actually help to stop the virus as soon as possible. I'm really glad by what I see and WHO support will always be there," he added.

Dr Kyabayinze said Uganda plans are underway to quickly establish between two to four temporary Ebola treatment centres in DR Congo to support in-country response and reduce importation of cases into Uganda. Each centre will have about 40 health workers from Uganda, and this will be done in collaboration with other partners and the DR Congo government.

President Museveni, in a statement on Monday evening via his X handle, said, "We discussed the Ebola outbreak in the region and the measures needed to strengthen prevention and response efforts." "I stressed the importance of community awareness, early detection, and cross-border collaboration. Uganda has experience in mobilising communities to confront public health challenges, as we did during the fight against HIV/Aids," he said. "Through science, leadership, and cooperation with partners such as WHO, we can continue to protect our people and strengthen regional health security," he added.