

Deadly virus may have killed more than 100 in Zaire

KINSHASA, Zaire (AP) — Soldiers blocked routes into a city of 600,000 that was placed under quarantine Tuesday after more than 100 people died of a mysterious disease that may be caused by one of the world's deadliest viruses.

A consultant for the World Health Organization said the Ebola virus was responsible for the deaths. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it was sending a team of investigators equipped with protective suits and respirators immediately, in cooperation with the World Health Organization.

"With the little we know, we're going to have to assume that this could be Biosafety Level 4," the highest level of concern of infection, said Dr. Rima Khabbaz, an infectious disease specialist at the centers.

Dr. Muyembe Tamfun, a microbiologist and consultant to the World Health Organization, blamed the Ebola virus for the illness that began sweeping Kikwit, 375 miles east of Kinshasa, the capital, in mid-April.

Ebola, which causes hemorrhaging, fevers and vomit-

ing, was considered the most deadly virus before the appearance of HIV, which causes AIDS. Ebola kills about 90 percent of those it infects and no treatment or vaccine is known.

The virus' ferocity has given it notoriety in popular culture. Ebola was the virus fought in the movie *Robin Cook's "Virus,"* which appeared Monday on NBC television. The recent movie "Outbreak" concerned a hemorrhagic virus that first appeared in Zaire, although it was not specifically named as Ebola.

Doctors have not confirmed the cause of the outbreak, Khabbaz said. She acknowledged that Ebola "is a suspect any time you hear of anything with bleeding and hemorrhage."

Investigators hope to reach Kikwit in a few days and the diagnosis should be relatively rapid "if it's something we know and have dealt with," Khabbaz said.

In 1976, 274 of 300 people infected in an Ebola outbreak in one village in Zaire died. Ebola is spread through bodily fluids and secretions, though not through

// **W**ith the little we know, we're going to have to assume that this could be Biosafety Level 4.

— DR. RIMA KHABBAZ
infectious disease specialist

casual contact.

Officials at Zaire's health ministry say the outbreak began April 10 when a surgical patient at Kikwit's hospital contaminated medical personnel there.

Sixty-three people remained hospitalized with the illness in Kikwit on Tuesday. Health officials equipped with gloves, masks and other protective equipment were being sent to the city to deal with the outbreak, and Tamfun appealed for international assistance.

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