

'Vital' to Resume Flights to Ebola-Hit Countries, Says WHO

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Geneva: The World Health Organization on Thursday said it was vital that airlines resume flights to Ebola-hit west Africa, warning that suspension of flights was threatening efforts to beat the epidemic.

"Right now there is a super risk of the response effort being choked off because we simply cannot get enough seats on enough airplanes to get people in and out, and get goods and supplies in," WHO's emergency chief Bruce Aylward told reporters as he launched a nine-month Ebola battle plan.

"We assume that the current restrictions on airlines will stop within the next couple of weeks," he told reporters. "This is absolutely vital."

WHO has declared Ebola an international health emergency, but has insisted repeatedly that trade and travel restrictions are not the answer.

But in the face of the spiralling Ebola toll in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, airlines have reduced and suspended flights.

"There's got to be global preparedness. There's got to be preparedness in major transport hubs. But bans on travel and trade will not stop this virus. In fact, you are more likely to compromise the ability to respond," said Aylward.

"It's a self-defeating strategy to ban travel," he added. "That's not the problem. People with Ebola are symptomatic. You can exit screen" flights leaving the affected countries by taking passengers temperatures, which can "substantively reduce risk".

On Wednesday, Air France became the latest carrier to announce a suspension of its service to Sierra Leone, while British Airways said it was stopping its flights to Freetown and Monrovia until next year.

Royal Air Morocco is now the only airline providing a regular service to the capitals of Sierra Leone and Liberia, while Brussels Airlines offer an irregular schedule.

The UN envoy on Ebola, David Nabarro, this week criticised airlines for scrapping flights, warning that Ebola-hit countries faced increased isolation and made it harder for the UN to carry out its work.

"I saw someone write somewhere that 'the closing of these air borders is understandable'. No it's not," said Aylward.

"Not if you understand the disease, you educate yourself on it, you put in place the proper procedures. This is an alarming aspect of how it's evolved, and how we can manage the response," he said.

Aylward said the flight suspensions were linked to a broader issue, saying airlines struggled to find safety-accredited hotels for their crews' overnight stays, or faced restrictions on landing rights for refuelling.

WHO is striving to bridge the gap as it seeks to ramp up the global response to Ebola with a \$490 million programme.

"A short-term air bridge is built into this," said Aylward.

"But if we have to go with a long-term air bridge, that ends up costing \$30 million instead of \$15 million," he said.