

Alert response level of Ebola preparedness and response plan activated

The Government today (July 18) announced the activation of the Alert Response Level in accordance with the Preparedness and Response Plan for Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) following the World Health Organization (WHO)'s declaration of the EVD outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).

The WHO yesterday (July 17) declared the EVD outbreak in the DRC as a PHEIC. Since the start of the EVD outbreak in the DRC in August last year, there have been 2 522 confirmed or probable cases including 1 698 deaths (as of July 16). At least 136 cases affected health workers including 40 deaths. The intensity of the epidemiological situation is fluctuating, with about 80 new cases reported weekly. A confirmed case of EVD was reported in Goma of the DRC on July 14. Goma is a city of 2 million inhabitants close to the Rwandan border. According to the WHO, the risk remains very high at national and regional levels but still low at the global level.

"In view of the PHEIC declared and current epidemiological situation, the Alert Response Level, the lowest level under its three-tier EVD Plan, is activated by the Government. We will issue letters to doctors and hospitals to inform them of the latest situation, and will also closely monitor overseas developments and the WHO's recommendations," a spokesman for the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) said.

The EVD Plan sets out the Government's preparedness and response plan in case of an outbreak of EVD. A three-tier response level is adopted in the plan. Three response levels, namely Alert, Serious and Emergency, are based on the risk assessment of the EVD that may affect Hong Kong and its health impact on the community.

"Viral haemorrhagic fever (including EVD) has been a notifiable infectious disease in Hong Kong since July 2008. Suspected or confirmed cases of EVD must be promptly reported to the CHP for investigation, control and surveillance. Locally, there has been no confirmed EVD case to date," the spokesman said.

Prevention and control measures against EVD have been put in place locally, including:

- Temperature screening for inbound travellers has been in place at all boundary control points. Suspected cases of EVD will be taken to public hospitals for isolation and management until their specimens test negative for the Ebola virus;

- Strengthened surveillance of patients with EVD symptoms who have a travel history to the DRC within 21 days before onset; and
- Publicity and health education on EVD will be strengthened at all boundary control points.

There is currently no registered vaccine for EVD in Hong Kong. The public should avoid unnecessary travel to affected areas, and observe good personal and environmental hygiene during travel:

- Always use liquid soap or alcohol-based hand rub to clean hands before touching the eyes, nose and mouth;
- Avoid close contact with feverish or sick patients, and contact with blood or body fluids of patients, including items which may have come into contact with patients' blood or body fluids;
- Avoid contact with animals; and
- Cook food thoroughly before consumption.

The EVD Plan and more information on the disease are available on the CHP's EVD page (www.chp.gov.hk/en/view_content/34199.html). The public can also visit the page of CHP's Travel Health Service (www.travelhealth.gov.hk/english/outbreaknews/outbreaknews.html) for relevant travel health advice.