Jamaica prepares for Ebola outbreak

THE PAN American Health Organisation (PAHO) and fellow Caribbean countries have committed to assist Jamaica in its readiness to deal with an Ebola outbreak, should the deadly virus pose a threat to the country.

This comes in light of the fact that the United States is now on high alert with its first confirmed Ebola case earlier this week and the tracing and isolation of people the patient, Thomas Eric Duncan, is suspected to have come in contact with.

Among the commitments is to provide personal protection equipment (PPE) and gear for health-care workers, which will include gloves, masks, gowns or full-body suits, high boots and eye or face shields. "PAHO has confirmed support for the provision of PPEs from its warehouse in Panama. If the need arises in Jamaica, items can be made available within 24 hours of notification of a case," acting permanent secretary in the Ministry of Health, Dr Kevin Harvey, said in a statement yesterday. TALKS WITH UNITED STATES He said the Government was also in dialogue with the United States to provide additional PPEs. Harvey said although Jamaica had available supplies, the ministry has fast-tracked the procurement of additional gear. Yesterday (Oct 2), health officials expressed concern that Jamaica did not have adequate supply of PPEs and other gear to deal with an Ebola outbreak. The deadly disease, which kills up to 90 per cent of its victims, is transmitted through direct contact with blood and body fluids of infected persons. During an outbreak, the disease can spread quickly in health-care facilities, hence the importance of quarantine areas and protective gear for health-care workers and those who have to care for infected persons. Harvey, who returns to the island this week following a PAHO Directing Council meeting in Washington, DC in the United States, said assistance will also be given for review of protocols for the collection of blood samples and their transportation to the US Centres for Disease Control or the Canadian Public Health Agency for testing. GUIDELINES PROVIDED He said PAHO has provided guidelines on the collection, storage and transportation of samples, including guidelines for the deactivation of the virus to ensure safety for lab staff. Additionally, there will also be the provision of protocols and a discussion on surveillance and strengthening detection at points of entry and accident and emergency departments, which are the areas a potential case will most likely first hit the radar. The release also noted that the acting permanent secretary was having discussions with Jamaica's international partners on the availability of isolation facilities, equipment and supplies, and the state of readiness of Jamaica's isolation facility, as well as the fast-tracking of procurement for any other items that may be needed. Other critical areas of assistance will be in the reviewing of the clinical management of cases, and handling of medical waste generated from a case. There is also the need for appropriate mechanisms for the burial or disposal of bodies of persons who die from the virus, as the bodies would still be contagious, and must be handled by specially trained persons. Specialists advise that the bodies be wrapped in two specially made body bags and cremated or buried immediately without an autopsy. The bodies should not be handled without the use of special protective gear. The virus can also be transmitted through contaminated areas and equipment. Ebola has been ravaging sections of west Africa for several months, with recent data from the World Health Organization revealing that, so far, more than 6,574 persons have been affected, and more than 3,091 have died from it. The worst affected countries are Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.