Abuja, Nigeria, 28 February 2018 — Nigeria's Lassa fever outbreak has reached record highs with 317 laboratory confirmed cases, according to figures released by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) this week.

Although endemic to the West African nation, Lassa fever has never reached this case count in Nigeria before. The number of confirmed cases during the past two months exceeds the total number of confirmed cases reported in 2017.

The outbreak has affected 18 states since the first case was detected on 1 January 2018, resulting in 72 deaths caused by the acute viral haemorrhagic fever. A total of 2,845 people who have come into contact with patients have been identified and are being monitored.

The World Health Organization is supporting the NCDC-led response with a focus on strengthening coordination (including through the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network), surveillance, contact tracing, laboratory testing, clinical management of patients, and community engagement. State health authorities are mobilizing doctors and nurses to work in Lassa fever treatment centres.

"The ability to rapidly detect cases of infection in the community and refer them early for treatment improves patients' chances of survival and is critical to this response," said Dr Wondimagegnehu Alemu, WHO Representative to Nigeria.

Health facilities are particularly overstretched in the southern states of Edo, Ondo and Ebonyi. WHO is working with health authorities, national reference hospitals and the Alliance for International Medical Action (ALIMA) to rapidly expand treatment centres and better equip them to provide patient care while reducing the risks to staff. Among those infected are 14 health workers, four of whom have died.

"Given the large number of states affected, many people will seek treatment in health facilities that are not appropriately prepared to care for Lassa fever patients and the risk of infection to healthcare workers is likely to increase," said Dr Alemu.

Health workers are being trained in infection, prevention and control measures, such as the importance of wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) and isolating patients during treatment. WHO has provided an initial supply of PPE, other related materials and is assessing additional needs with a view to addressing them.

WHO is also supporting national response efforts in neighbouring Benin, where more than 20 suspected cases have been reported.

http://www.afro.who.int/news/nigeria-battles-its-largest-lassa-fever-outbreak-record