The magnitude of the Ebola virus outbreak may be vastly underestimated, the World Health Organization said Thursday. More than 1,000 people have died and nearly 2,000 have been sickened. Photo: Getty Images

Ebola victims in Nigeria’s commercial capital Lagos will receive an experimental drug called Nano Silver, the country’s top health official said on Thursday, in a step that introduces a new untested treatment to the fight against an outbreak in several West African countries.

Nigeria’s Minister of Health, Onye buchi Chukwu, said the experimental drug came from a Nigerian scientist, whose name he wouldn’t disclose. He said the drug, which was on its way to Lagos, would aim to treat the eight Nigerians who have tested positive for Ebola.

The World Health Organization opened the door for experimental Ebola drugs this week, after a panel of ethicists it convened condensed such treatments because of the challenges controlling an outbreak that has killed at least 1,069 people. A handful of medications and vaccines have been developed, but not tested on humans.

(Ebola virus: West African treatment centers filling up fast).

The U.S. began evacuating families of embassy personnel in Sierra Leone on Thursday, citing concerns that local medical facilities have become overwhelmed by the spread of the virus.

"There is a lack of options for routine health-care services at major medical facilities due to the Ebola outbreak," State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said.

The State Department took similar steps last week in Liberia. While the agency said the moves represent "an abundance of caution," they also underscore an escalating public-health crisis in West Africa.

The disease appears contained in Nigeria, but "elsewhere, the outbreak is expected to continue for some time," the WHO said.

Liberal’s government has ordered three courses of the experimental drug ZMapp, which was given earlier to two Americans infected with virus. Given the scarce global supply of the experimental drugs, the decision of what treatments to give to which patients has proved controversial.
Though Nigerian authorities are hopeful, little is known about Nano Silver. A Nigerian contagious-disease expert, Dr. Simon Agwale, said Nano Silver had proven effective against viruses, bacteria, and parasites. "It may be also a source of a cure" for Ebola patients, Dr. Agwale said.

The Ebola outbreak has caused havoc in West Africa, where most of the victims have been concentrated in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Nigeria and Ivory Coast have restricted flights from Ebola-infected countries while Zambia has banned travelers from nations battling outbreaks.

Following a review of its West Africa business, Kenya Airways said on Thursday that it is still operating flights in West Africa.

The airline said it is in close contact with the WHO and will continue to evaluate the situation. After consulting with the WHO, airline regulators and experts, Kenya Airways said it had concluded that the current risks of Ebola spreading by air travel are "minimal."

"Withdrawal of our flights to these key destinations given the safeguards already placed by the respective governments and global health authorities would amount to a corporate placement of unnecessary travel advisory," Kenya Airways said.

The WHO has labeled Kenya as high risk for the spread of Ebola because of its status as a transport hub. Yet the health body also says the risks posed to tourists and business travelers to infected areas "is extremely low," in part because transmission requires direct contact with blood and bodily fluids of an infected victim.

Korean Air (003490.SE -3.06%) said Thursday it was suspending its three-times a week flights to Nairobi because of concerns over the spread of the Ebola virus.

A Korean Air spokesman said the suspension has nothing to do with the performance of the segment, although he couldn't immediately confirm the number of passengers per flight on the route.

—In-Soo Nam and Jeffrey Sparshott contributed to this article.

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