Ebola outbreak in Congo declared a global health emergency

GENEVA (AP) — The deadly Ebola outbreak in Congo is now an international health emergency, the World Health Organization announced Wednesday after a case was confirmed in a city of 2 million people.

A WHO expert committee declined on three previous occasions to advise the United Nations health agency to make the declaration for this outbreak, even though other experts say it has long met the required conditions. More than 1,600 people have died since August in the second-deadliest Ebola outbreak in history, which is unfolding in a region described as a war zone.

A declaration of a global health emergency often brings greater international attention and aid, along with concerns that nervous governments might overreact with border closures.

The declaration comes days after a single case was confirmed in Goma, a major regional crossroads in northeastern Congo on the Rwandan border, with an
international airport. Also, a sick Congolese fish trader traveled to Uganda and back while symptomatic — and later died of Ebola.

While the risk of regional spread remains high, the risk outside the region remains low, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said after the announcement in Geneva.

The international emergency "should not be used to stigmatize or penalize the very people who are most in need of our help," he said. Tedros insisted that the declaration was not made to raise more money — even though WHO estimated "hundreds of millions" of dollars would be needed to stop the epidemic.

Dr. Joanne Liu, president of Doctors Without Borders, said she hoped the emergency designation would prompt a radical reset of Ebola response efforts. "The reality check is that a year into the epidemic, it's still not under control, and we are not where we should be," she said. "We cannot keep doing the same thing and expect different results."

Liu said vaccination strategies should be broadened and that more efforts should be made to build trust within communities.

The U.S. Agency for International Development applauded the WHO decision and said USAID officials would "continue to scale up life-saving support" to end the outbreak. Which now looks like it cannot be contained.