Tanzania on Tuesday confirmed its first-ever cases of Marburg Virus Disease after laboratory tests were carried out following reports of cases and deaths in the country's north-west Kagera region.

Tanzania's National Public Health Laboratory analyzed samples to determine the cause of illness after eight people developed symptoms including fever, vomiting, bleeding and renal failure.

Five of the eight cases, including a health worker, have died and the remaining three are receiving treatment. A total of 161 contacts have been identified and are being monitored.

"The efforts by Tanzania's health authorities to establish the cause of the disease are a clear indication of the determination to effectively respond to the outbreak. We are working with the government to rapidly scale up control measures to halt the spread of the virus and end the outbreak as soon as possible," said Dr Matshidiso Moeti, World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Africa.

WHO is supporting the Ministry of Health to deploy an emergency team to Kagera to carry out further epidemiological investigations. The emergency team will focus on active case finding in the community and local health care facilities to identify more contacts and provide them with appropriate care.

While Tanzania has never previously recorded a Marburg case, it has had to respond to other health emergencies including COVID-19, cholera and dengue within the past three years.

A strategic risk assessment conducted by WHO in September 2022 showed that the country is at high to very high risk for infectious diseases outbreaks.

"The lessons learnt, and progress made during other recent outbreaks should stand the country in good stead as it confronts this latest challenge," said Dr Moeti. "We will continue to work closely with the national health authorities to save lives."

Marburg virus disease is highly virulent and causes hemorrhagic fever, with a fatality ratio of up to 88 per cent.

It is in the same family as the virus that causes Ebola virus disease. Illness caused by Marburg virus begins abruptly, with high fever, severe headache and severe malaise.

Many patients develop severe hemorrhagic symptoms within seven days. The virus is transmitted to people from fruit bats and spreads among humans through direct contact with the bodily fluids of infected people, surfaces and materials.

There are no vaccines or antiviral treatments approved to treat the virus. However, supportive care – rehydration with oral or intravenous fluids – and treatment of specific symptoms, improves survival.