

Toronto, Oct 14 (AP) - Human testing of an experimental Canadian-made Ebola vaccine began Monday, with federal officials saying the drug could be shipped to West Africa within months if it proves successful. Health Minister Rona Ambrose said the launch of the vaccine's first clinical trial marks a promising step in the global campaign to contain the virus, which the World Health Organization says has killed more than 4,000 people, mostly in the West African countries of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. "This provides hope because if the Canadian vaccine is shown to be safe and effective, it will stop this devastating outbreak," Ambrose said in a conference call from Calgary. Twenty vials of the vaccine have been sent to the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research in Maryland for testing on about 40 healthy volunteers, she said. The Phase 1 trial will determine if the vaccine created by Public Health Agency of Canada and known as VSV-EBOV is safe for human use. It will also determine the proper dosage level and test for possible side effects, Ambrose said. Studies have shown the vaccine works in primates both to prevent infection when given before exposure and to increase survival chances when given quickly after exposure. Canada's chief public health officer said results from the human trial are expected by December, and if successful, the next stage would be to test it in a larger human sample, including those directly handling Ebola cases in West Africa. "The health-care workers on the ground are the most likely target to do the next step," which could begin by the end of the year or early 2015, Dr. Gregory Taylor said in a news conference in Toronto. A small U.S. company called NewLink Genetics holds the licence for the vaccine and will be arranging the trials at the U.S. military lab. NewLink said earlier this month that at least five clinical trials involving the vaccine would soon be underway in the United States, Germany, Switzerland and in an unnamed African country which is not battling Ebola. The Canadian government has also said it wants to conduct a trial in this country. The aim of these early trials is to see if the vaccine is safe for human use and how much vaccine is needed to generate what is hoped to be a protective response in people.