

New Ebola outbreak flares up as measles, COVID-19 rage in DRC

Enlarge / Health workers operate within an Ebola safety zone in the Health Center in Iyonda, near Mbandaka, on June 1, 2018.

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A new outbreak of Ebola has ignited in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is still trying to stamp out an Ebola outbreak from 2018—and is now also battling a massive measles outbreak and COVID-19.

The new Ebola outbreak is in the western city of Mbandaka, the capital of the Équateur Province. The city—situated at the junction of the Congo and Ruki Rivers—is a major trade and travel hub and home to more than 1 million people.

On Monday, June 1, 2020, officials confirmed an outbreak with six cases so far (three confirmed, three probable). Four of the cases have died, and two are being treated. The World Health Organization reported that officials expect to find more cases as outbreak responses ramp up.

The outbreak is the 11th recorded in the DRC since Ebola was discovered in the country in 1976.

Officials believe that the DRC's new outbreak is unrelated to

the ongoing 10th outbreak, which began in August 2018 on the eastern side of the country—in the North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri provinces. That outbreak has included 3,463 cases (3,317 confirmed and 146 probable), and 2,280 people have died, making it the second-largest outbreak recorded.

The outbreak is now considered to be in its final stages. Health workers haven't identified a new case since April 27, and the last person with a confirmed case who survived was released from treatment on May 14. That day began a 42-day countdown—two incubation periods for Ebola—before the outbreak can be officially declared over.

In April, officials were just days away from declaring the outbreak over, only to discover a new cluster of cases.

Meanwhile, the DRC has been battling one of the world's largest measles outbreaks, with 369,520 cases and 6,779 deaths reported since 2019.

And as of May 31, officials have reported 3,195 cases and 72 deaths from COVID-19.

The new Ebola outbreak is “happening at a challenging time,” Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa, said in a statement. WHO already has members in Mbandaka helping with the response but is also sending an additional support team to help scale up response efforts.

“Given the proximity of this new outbreak to busy transport routes and vulnerable neighbouring countries we must act quickly,” Dr. Moeti said.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus noted that the new outbreak “is a reminder that COVID-19 is not the only health threat people face. Although much of our attention is on the pandemic, WHO is continuing to monitor and respond to many other health emergencies.”

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