

Officials: Ebola breaks out in Uganda

July 28 2012, by RODNEY MUHUMUZA

(AP) — The deadly Ebola virus has killed 14 people in western Uganda this month, Ugandan health officials said on Saturday, ending weeks of speculation about the cause of a strange disease that had many people fleeing their homes.

The officials and a World Health Organization representative told a news conference in Kampala Saturday that there is "an outbreak of Ebola" in Uganda.

"Laboratory investigations done at the Uganda Virus Research Institute...have confirmed that the strange disease reported in Kibaale is indeed Ebola hemorrhagic fever," the Ugandan government and WHO said in joint statement.

Kibaale is a district in midwestern Uganda, where people in recent weeks have been troubled by a mysterious illness that seemed to have come from nowhere. Ugandan health officials had been stumped as well, and spent weeks conducting laboratory tests that were at first inconclusive.

On Friday, Joaquim Saweka, the WHO representative in Uganda, told The Associated Press that investigators were "not so sure" it was Ebola, and a Ugandan health official dismissed the possibility of Ebola as merely a rumor. It appears firm evidence of Ebola was clinched overnight.

Health officials told reporters in Kampala that the 14 dead were among

20 reported with the disease. Two of the infected have been isolated for examination by researchers and health officials. A clinical officer and, days later, her 4-month-old baby died from the disease caused by the Ebola virus, officials said.

Officials urged Ugandans to be calm, saying a national emergency taskforce had been set up to stop the disease from spreading far and wide.

There is no cure or vaccine for Ebola, and in Uganda, where in 2000 the disease killed 224 people and left hundreds more traumatized, it resurrects terrible memories. There have been isolated cases since, such as in 2007 when an outbreak of a new strain of Ebola killed at least 37 people in Bundibugyo, a remote district close to the Congolese border, but none as deadly as in 2000.

Ebola, which manifests itself as a hemorrhagic fever, is highly infectious and kills quickly. It was first reported in 1976 in Congo and is named for the river where it was recognized, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A CDC factsheet on Ebola says the disease is "characterized by fever, headache, joint and muscle aches, sore throat, and weakness, followed by diarrhea, vomiting, and stomach pain. A rash, red eyes, hiccups and internal and external bleeding may be seen in some patients."

Scientists don't know the natural reservoir of the virus, but they suspect the first victim in an Ebola outbreak gets infected through contact with an infected animal, such as a monkey.

The virus can be transmitted through direct contact with the blood or secretions of an infected person, or objects that have been contaminated with infected secretions. During communal funerals, for example, when

the bereaved come into contact with an Ebola victim, the virus can be contracted, officials said, warning against unnecessary contact with suspected cases of Ebola.

In Kibaale, some villagers had started abandoning their homes in recent weeks to escape what they thought was an illness that had something to do with bad luck, because people were quickly falling ill and dying, and there was no immediate explanation, officials said.

Officials said now that they've verified Ebola in the area they can concentrate on controlling the disease. Ebola patients were being treated at the only major hospital in Kibaale, said Stephen Byaruhanga, the district's health secretary.

"Being a strange disease, we were shocked to learn that it was Ebola," Byaruhanga said. "Our only hope is that in the past when Ebola broke out in other parts of Uganda it was controlled."

The challenge, he said, was retaining the services of all the nurses and doctors who are being asked to risk their lives in order to look after the sick.

"Their lives are at stake," he said.

Officials also worry that other villagers suffering from other diseases might be afraid to visit the hospital for fear of catching Ebola, he said.

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