

Bitter lessons from old Ebola frontline in Uganda

October 22 2014, by Amy Fallon

In Ebola-hit communities in west Africa, hope of stopping the deadly virus may seem far away at times.

But across the continent in Uganda, villagers who survived an outbreak two years ago describe how after the loss, the rebuilding of communities is tough and painful - but possible.

When Sabiti Mugerwa's [family](#) became the only ones in their village to fall sick with a mysterious disease in October 2012, they blamed it on malaria - or witchcraft.

"We would give him tablets and he'd be okay, but after five minutes he'd start shivering again like the malaria was hitting him badly," remembered Mugerwa, 30, of his older brother Muhamad.

Today he sits in the small one bedroom brick house belonging to his parents in Bombo, some 75 kilometres (50 miles) north of the capital Kampala.

The property, which has a poster stuck to the wall reading "Our house is protected with the blood of Jesus", is the same home where Muhamad, 35, an energetic motorbike taxi driver returned feeling feverish.

A week later and after vomiting blood, he died in hospital. The cause of his death was still unknown to his close-knit family when they buried him a day later.

Then Muhamad's widow Halima, as well as Sabiti's wife Rehema and sister Gladys also fell sick, and were rushed to the clinic.

It was Rehema's bleeding "through the nose, the ears, mouth, everywhere" that alerted doctors that they weren't dealing with malaria, said Mugerwa.

All three died, and Mugerwa was taken to hospital in the capital, where he was diagnosed with Ebola.

The disease had killed 224 people in northern Uganda in 2000. About three months earlier, another outbreak in Kibaale, western Uganda, killed 17.

"Sometimes we would think this is a government story, just lying - until it affected us," he said.

'Happy I'm a survivor'

When he himself contracted the viral hemorrhagic fever all Mugerwa could think was "this is it."

"I knew I would never survive," he said, adding that he "gave up".

After more than three weeks in hospital, Mugerwa was released and went to live with his parents.

His mother, who'd given birth to six children, suddenly had to care for six grandchildren aged between three and 10.

"I don't have anything I can say," she said, sitting on the dirt floor of her home. She calls Ebola simply "the tragedy".

"I'll never forget about it," she said.

Her son meanwhile is ultimately "happy I'm a survivor" but life has not been the same since.

Once home recovering, concerned friends flocked to the family home but "they wouldn't come close."

Today they're no longer afraid, but the family is still called "Ebola" by neighbours. Mugerwa brushes it off as "a joke".

Before contracting the disease, he was a bricklayer who could make up to 500 bricks a day and also rode a motorbike taxi, earning almost 20 dollars on a good day.

"Life was okay," said Mugerwa.

But after contracting the disease Mugerwa was forced to sell his motorbike to pay for his transport to hospital, for medicine and to support his family.

Today he still gets tired easily, but when he has some energy, he digs in his garden to put food on the table for his family and pay the school fees. When he struggles, his mother also digs.

Before Ebola there was AIDS in his family, said Mugerwa.

"I'd very much prefer to get infected with AIDS than Ebola," he said.
"You have another chance of living with AIDS but Ebola finishes you."

In west Africa, more than 4,500 people have died this year, the largest Ebola epidemic in history.

"I feel really sorry for them, but I don't have anything I can do for them," said Mugerwa, speaking of people in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea.

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