

## In DR Congo city, worry and anger over Ebola scare

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People in Mbandaka in northwest Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) were fearful and angry Friday after an Ebola outbreak spread from remote villages to their densely-populated city.

A wave of concern rippled through the Congo River port city after the World Health Organization (WHO) and the DRC's health ministry on Thursday reported a confirmed case of the deadly viral disease in one of the city's districts.

In bars, restaurants and offices, staff swiftly reacted to radio news reports by offering soap and basins of water for people to wash their hands—a basic preventative step against infection.

The country's health ministry said Friday that it had activated an "action plan" boosting safeguards in the city.

Police also stepped up deployment at key intersections in the city, whose population is estimated at up to 1.2 million.

But several people who spoke to AFP said the safety net had many holes in it, and angrily blamed the authorities.

"The authorities have done nothing to prevent Ebola reaching Mbandaka," said a man who gave his name as Claude.

"I come from Bikoro," a man called Abraham told AFP, referring to the

rural region, about 150 kilometres (90 miles) from Mbandaka, where the outbreak was first reported on May 8.

"There are only two checkpoints on more than 100 kilometres (60 miles) of road in the villages of Kalamba and Ndenga.

"This isn't effective because many people travelling by motorbike or on foot evade inspection."

Market hawker Adolphine Dikela said on Thursday: "Even at normal times, the hospitals are short of medicines. How are we going to survive if the disease spreads here?"

## **Port controls**

The outbreak's overall death toll rose on Friday to 25 out of 45 cases, 14 of them confirmed in laboratory tests, WHO spokesman Tarik Jasarevic told reporters in Geneva.

The [public health risk](#) is now "very high" nationally and "high" regionally, the WHO said, highlighting Mbandaka's place as a transport hub on the Congo River system.

The city is located upstream from the DRC capital Kinshasa as well as Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of Congo, and downstream from Bangui, the capital the Central African Republic, one of the poorest countries in the world.

An AFP reporter who visited Mbandaka's river ports found staff had been issued with infrared pistol thermometers to check travellers for high temperatures, soap and basins of water, as well as logbooks for writing down travellers' names and addresses.

"We've received instructions from the authorities to close all ways out apart from one, so that people go through a checkpoint," said an official.

In the privately-run port of Menge, [health ministry](#) workers were systematically checking people's temperatures with thermometers.

"But we don't have enough of the thermometers, so people are crowding up and getting annoyed," said Joseph Dangbele, a Menge port official.

On Thursday, a doctor at Mbandaka General Hospital, who requested anonymity, told AFP that more than 300 people in the city had had either direct or indirect contact with Ebola.

The outbreak is the ninth in the DRC since Ebola was identified in 1976. The disease is named after a Congolese river where the first known cases were recorded. The last outbreak in the country was rapidly brought under control in 2017, at an official cost of four lives.

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