

Ebola fear empties DR Congo village schools

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In the village of Mangina, where dozens have died of Ebola at the epicentre of Democratic Republic of Congo's latest outbreak, children are to be seen everywhere—except in school, because their parents fear they will be infected in class.

"The [children](#) are not here today. It's the parents who are keeping them at home," primary school teacher Christian Muhindo said as he paced between empty desks. "They think that the children will be easily contaminated at school."

"They don't know that teachers have been taught to cope," Muhindo said. "UNICEF has trained us to protect the children and to take the right steps in the event of a sick child."

Teaching staff and aid workers fear that children who walk around freely in the village pose a risk far worse than they would pose in a monitored classroom.

Ebola has already claimed more than 60 lives in Mangina, a village of just a few thousand inhabitants.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) has encouraged teachers to see that basins of chlorinated water are placed in schools.

The viral haemorrhagic fever broke out in the Beni region of the eastern North Kivu province on August 1 in the middle of the school holidays.

Of the 81 deaths registered by authorities, 62 were in Mangina, according to an updated toll on Monday, the first day of the new school year.

Mangina's secondary school is usually bustling at this time of year with between 560 and 600 children, according to headmistress Aldegonde Batsyoto.

"Today, we only enrolled two pupils," she said.

"On the radio, in church, they announce that the new academic year has already arrived and that all necessary precautions have been taken. But in the villages, they're afraid that children will be contaminated at school."

Safer at school

In its early stages, Ebola has symptoms similar to those of other fevers, but it can end in massive organ damage and unstoppable bleeding.

A recent decline in the death rate, alongside a slight rise in the number of patients who recover, has failed to reassure residents.

On the streets of the village, children were left to their own devices, even playing close to the schools banned by their parents.

But Batsyoto said they would be safer in their classrooms.

"At home, you can't know where the child has been wandering about, what he has picked up, but here, we know how to keep an eye on him from 7:30 am to 1:30 pm," she said.

Two men in the schoolyard presented themselves as representatives of parents of the school's pupils.

"We would like the children first to receive the vaccine," said Adam Bangole, father of nine children, referring to an experimental preventive anti-Ebola vaccine that has already been administered to more than 5,700 people.

Not a single child turned up at a third school, Makukulu primary, which was attended by 859 pupils last year.

During the vacation, a 13-year-old girl died of Ebola, Makukulu school headmaster Salvatore Kasereka Mayolo said.

"The parents are frightened," he said.

'Farming folk'

The sprawling Ebola Treatment Centre in Mangina was set up by the NGO Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in mid-August.

Inside there were just five people hospitalised compared to about 40 a few weeks earlier. There were reports of several patients having recovered.

"Ebola is a supplementary factor slowing down the return to school," said UNICEF's coordinator in North Kivu, Jerome Kouachi.

The aid worker recalled that school activities had also been slow to resume in Sierra Leone and Guinea after the West African epidemic of 2014-15, which crossed borders and killed more than 11,000 people.

The Ebola outbreak comes on top of the difficulties faced every year by millions of parents around the vast DRC, from Kinshasa to Goma and Lubumbashi to Kisangani: the cost of school fees and supplies.

At the Mangina secondary school, admission costs \$35 every three months—a sum that can bankrupt families.

In this rural community on the road between the agricultural trading town of Beni and the Ituri territory, activity has been brought to a standstill by Ebola.

"Truly, people are not going to get through this," headmistress Batsyoto said.

At another school, the head Henriette Kahindu Kavira said lack of money was behind a drop in attendance.

"Most parents here are farming folk. Last year, we started with 800 pupils, but we finished with 629 because of their lack of financial means," she said.

Two hundred pupils receive financial help from the Danish Refugee Council, she added.

In a nation where half the total population of some 78 million is aged under 18, almost seven million children do not go to [school](#), UNICEF estimated in 2016.

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