

'Huge challenge' to halt DR Congo Ebola outbreak: Red Cross

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Efforts to rein in an Ebola outbreak raging in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo are being complicated by the geographical spread and growing suspicion towards outsiders fighting the epidemic, the Red Cross said Friday.

Since the outbreak of the deadly virus was declared on August 1 in the eastern North Kivu province, 137 confirmed or probable cases have been registered, including 92 deaths, according to DRC health authorities.

Kinshasa last week said the outbreak was "under control", with the speed of transmission slowing significantly since mid-August.

But while the number of cases and deaths are not currently surging, Red Cross's disaster chief warned that the growing geographical spread of cases, as well as increasing community resistance was deeply worrying.

"This has not been contained geographically. That is a huge challenge," Pascale Meige told AFP in a telephone interview after a visit to the affected areas.

The epicentre of the outbreak remains in Mabalako and Beni in North Kivu, but six other areas in that province have also been affected, as well as one in neighbouring Ituri province, according to the World Health Organization.

The recent spread of Ebola to Butembo in North Kivu, an important

commercial hub of one million people, is particularly concerning since it is close to Goma, a large city that borders Rwanda.

'Risk of further spread'

"The risks are really high in terms of further spread," Meige said.

She also warned that rumours were spreading in affected communities that were harming efforts to halt the outbreak, she said, including that Ebola was a hoax aimed to enrich foreign health workers, or a political ploy connected with looming DRC elections.

"The level of mistrust is extremely high," said Meige, who heads disaster and crisis response and recovery at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

She hailed the "extremely sophisticated response" so far by the DRC health ministry, the WHO and others, but warned that each time a case appears in a new place, those efforts must be duplicated.

The response includes peppering affected areas with hand-washing stations, campaigns to get the sick to quickly seek treatment, and tireless efforts to track and vaccinate anyone who has been in contact with Ebola patients, as well as their contacts.

IFRC stands for a vital part of the response by ensuring the highly contagious bodies of people who die from Ebola are buried in a safe and dignified manner.

"The systems are in place, and are very impressive," Meige said.

'Spreading mistrust'

But she said the growing geographic spread meant it was becoming increasingly difficult to nip harmful rumours in the bud, or to address significant community resistance to allowing strangers in hazmat suits orchestrate burials.

There had been "a number of incidents" where IFRC teams were attacked with rocks and chased away, she said.

In one case in Butembo, the family of the deceased had agreed to allow an IFRC team bury their loved one, only to have the wider community revolt.

People pulled the body out of the casket, Meige said, adding that fortunately in that case it turned out that Ebola was not the cause of death.

As of Thursday, IFRC teams had conducted 126 "safe and dignified burials" in cases where people were confirmed or suspected of having died from Ebola.

But Meige said there were 22 such cases where the organisation's teams had not been able to conduct burials, due mainly to community resistance or lacking access over security concerns.

"Initially there was this concept of small pockets of resistance here and there," she said.

"Now what we see is ... that it is a much bigger problem. The mistrust is spreading."

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