

Tanzania says five dead in Marburg virus outbreak

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A mysterious disease that killed five people in Tanzania has been identified as Marburg hemorrhagic fever, a cousin of Ebola, the health ministry said on Tuesday.

"Our public health laboratory results have confirmed that this disease is caused by Marburg virus," Health Minister Ummu Mwalimu said, urging citizens to remain calm "as the government has managed to control the spread of the disease".

Three patients are receiving treatment in hospital and 161 contacts are being traced by the authorities, she added.

"There is no need to panic or stop economic activities as Tanzania is not the first. We have all we need to control the infectious disease," Mwalimu said.

The East African country last week sent a rapid response team to the northwestern region of Kagera which borders Uganda to probe the illness.

The Marburg virus is a highly dangerous microbe which causes severe fever, often accompanied by bleeding and organ failure.

It is part of the so-called filovirus family that also includes Ebola, which has wreaked havoc in several previous outbreaks in Africa.

The UN's World Health Organization (WHO) applauded Tanzania's rapid reaction to the outbreak, adding that it stood ready to ensure "there are no gaps in response."

"I call upon the community members to join hands with the government to make sure that the contacts are identified and those who need care are given at the right time," WHO country representative Zabulon Yoti said.

Neighboring Uganda, which witnessed its last outbreak in 2017, said it was on "high alert".

Human—wild animals interactions

The suspected natural source of the Marburg virus is the African fruit bat, which carries the pathogen but does not fall sick from it.

The virus takes its name from the German city of Marburg, where it was first identified in 1967, in a lab where workers had been in contact with infected green monkeys imported from Uganda.

The animals can pass the virus to primates in close proximity, including humans, and human-to-human transmission then occurs through contact with blood or other body fluids.

Fatality rates in confirmed cases have ranged from 24 percent to 88 percent in previous outbreaks, depending on the virus strain and case management, according to WHO.

There are currently no vaccines or antiviral treatments, but potential treatments, including blood products, immune therapies and drug therapies, as well as early candidate vaccines are being evaluated, the WHO says.

Eleven people died in an outbreak in the West African state of Equatorial Guinea first documented on January 7.

Previous outbreaks and sporadic cases have been reported in South Africa, Angola, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Last year, Tanzania identified an outbreak of leptospirosis or "rat fever" which killed three people in the southeastern region of Lindi.

The bacterial infection is commonly spread through consuming water or food contaminated by infected animal urine.

Tanzania's President Samia Suluhu Hassan said at the time that the disease may have been caused by "growing interaction" between humans and wild animals as a result of environmental degradation.

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