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Congo's Ebola outbreak poses challenges for bush meat

June 17 2018, by Sam Mednick

In this photo taken Tuesday, May 29, 2018, a street trader sells dried fish and smoked monkey meat at the port of Maluku in Kinshasa, Congo. Congo's latest deadly Ebola outbreak is hitting local traders of popular bush meat amid concerns about the virus jumping to humans from animals such as bats and monkeys. (AP Photo/John Bompengo)

For 25 years, Patrick Matondo has earned a living buying and selling monkeys, bats and other animals popularly known as bush meat along

the Congo River. Standing on the riverbank in Mbandaka, a city affected by the deadly new outbreak of the Ebola virus, the father of five said that for the first time he's worried he won't be able to support his family.

"Since Ebola was declared, business has decreased by almost half. It's really, really bad," the 47-year-old said, hanging his head.

Congo's latest Ebola outbreak declared in May has 38 confirmed cases, including 14 deaths. The discovery of a handful of Ebola cases among Mbandaka's more than 1 million residents also has hurt the economy, especially among traders of meat from wild animals.

The virus, which spreads through bodily fluids of those infected, has been known to jump from animals such as monkeys and bats to humans. In the West Africa outbreak four years ago that killed more than 11,000 people, it was widely suspected that the epidemic began when a 2-year-old boy in Guinea was infected by a bat.

Usually the wild animals are highly sought-after as popular sources of protein along with beef and pork, and cargo ships carrying the smoked meat arrive daily in the city, the trade hub for Congo's northwestern Equateur province. Meanwhile, bush meat markets still see locals bartering for the animals, both dead and alive. Prospective buyers pause at tables piled with monkey meat, picking up blackened chunks one by one for a closer look.

In this photo taken Thursday, May 31, 2018, traders sit in front of their boat at one of the ports in Mbandaka, Congo. Congo's latest deadly Ebola outbreak is hitting local traders of popular bush meat amid concerns about the virus jumping to humans from animals such as bats and monkeys. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

"Meat is very important for people here. It's one of the biggest industries in Mbandaka," said Matondo, a leader in the city's bush meat association.

Dr. Pierre Rollin, an Ebola expert with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said if the meat is cooked, smoked or dried it kills the virus. The people at greatest risk are hunters and butchers who process the meat, he said.

The World Health Organization has advised against trade and travel restrictions because of the current outbreak, which is mostly in remote areas.

In this photo taken Saturday, June 2, 2018, a monkey sits in a cage outside a bar, whose owner keeps this one as a pet, but who eats other monkeys for their meat, in Mbandaka, Congo. Congo's latest deadly Ebola outbreak is hitting local traders of popular bush meat amid concerns about the virus jumping to humans from animals such as bats and monkeys. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

Boats with bush meat continue to depart for the capital, Kinshasa, 600 kilometers (323 miles) downstream and for villages tucked deep in the rainforest up and down the river. Disease experts warned, however, that precautions are still necessary as monkeys and bats are sold live throughout the region.

Traders said demand has dwindled because of Ebola, with sales for many dropping from about 100 animals a day to about 20.

"Kinshasa and Brazzaville told us to stop sending monkeys and bats," said another trader in Mbandaka, Willy Taban, who said his business has been cut in half in recent weeks. He was referring to buyers in the capital of the nearby Republic of Congo, which is across the river from Kinshasa.

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Congo's health minister, Dr. Oly Ilunga Kalenga, said there are no plans to ban sales of bush meat in the province since bush meat is not the primary way the Ebola virus spreads. Instead, the government is focusing

on good hygiene practices such as hand-washing, he said.

Health officials are also tracking down anyone who had close contact with anyone infected by the virus, offering an experimental vaccine and promoting safe burials and other practices. Such health efforts can be challenging in communities where many people consider Ebola to be witchcraft. Others are skeptical that the disease exists, even though this is the Central African country's ninth outbreak.

One Mbandaka trader, Gamo Louambo, said he's still shipping 100 wild animals to Kinshasa daily and said he won't stop eating them as they're his main source of food. "I don't see Ebola. It isn't here," he said.

In this photo taken Saturday, June 2, 2018, a trader transports livestock by canoe on the Congo river near the port in Mbandaka, Congo. Congo's latest deadly Ebola outbreak is hitting local traders of popular bush meat amid concerns about the virus jumping to humans from animals such as bats and monkeys. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

In West Africa, where there had never been an outbreak before 2014, getting people to accept that Ebola was a real disease was key, said WHO's Jonathan Polonsky.

For those in Kinshasa, "Ebola is very far away," said Defede Mbale, immigration chief at the capital's port of Maluku.

Pointing to a poster of safe Ebola practices on his desk, he said the government has provided extra resources to patrol the river and take people's temperatures as they arrive by boats, checking for fevers.

In this photo taken Saturday, June 2, 2018, a monkey sits in a cage outside a bar, whose owner keeps this one as a pet, but who eats other monkeys for their meat, in Mbandaka, Congo. Congo's latest deadly Ebola outbreak is hitting local traders of popular bush meat amid concerns about the virus jumping to humans from animals such as bats and monkeys. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

He doesn't doubt the deadly virus exists, but Mbale said there's only so much that he's willing to change.

"We have our customs and they won't change because of Ebola," he said. "We'll eat all foods."

In this photo taken Tuesday, May 29, 2018, men paddle their canoe on the Congo river near the port in Mbandaka, Congo. Congo's latest deadly Ebola outbreak is hitting local traders of popular bush meat amid concerns about the virus jumping to humans from animals such as bats and monkeys. (AP Photo/Sam Mednick)

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