

'Young miracle:' Baby recovers from Ebola in Congo outbreak

14 December 2018, by Cara Anna



In this photograph taken last Dec. 3, 2018 and released by UNICEF, an Ebola survivor cares for one week-old Benedicte who was infected at birth with the Ebola virus by her mother, at an Ebola treatment center in Beni, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Benedicte's mother died. The child, who has recovered from the virus, is now called the "young miracle." One in three people infected with Ebola is a child and the mortality rate is much higher in children than in adults. (Guy Hubbard/UNICEF via AP)

They call her the "young miracle." A baby who was admitted to an Ebola treatment center just six days after birth has now recovered from the virus.

Congo's health ministry calls the baby the youngest survivor in what is now the world's second-deadliest Ebola outbreak.

The ministry late Thursday tweeted a photo of the infant, swaddled and with tiny mouth open in yawn or squall, surrounded by caregivers who watched over her 24 hours a day for weeks.

The baby's mother, who had Ebola, died in childbirth, the ministry said.

The infant was discharged from the treatment center in Beni on Wednesday. "She went home in the arms of her father and her aunt," the ministry said.

Experts have reported worryingly high numbers of children with Ebola in this outbreak, which Congo's health ministry says now has 515 cases, 467 of them confirmed, including 255 confirmed deaths.

The tiny survivor is named Benedicte. In video footage shared by UNICEF, she is shown in an isolated treatment area, cradled in the arms of health workers in protective gear or cuddled by Ebola survivors, called "nounous," who can go without certain gear such as masks. The survivors are crucial with their reassuring presence, the health ministry said.

"This is my first child," her father, Thomas, says. "I truly don't want to lose her. She is my hope." He gazes at his daughter through the clear protective plastic.

Children now account for more than one-third of all cases in this outbreak, UNICEF said earlier this week. One in 10 Ebola cases is in a child under 5 years old, it said, and children who contract the hemorrhagic fever are at greater risk of dying than adults.

While Ebola typically infects adults, as they are most likely to be exposed to the lethal virus, children have been known in some instances to catch the disease when they act as caregivers.

Few cases of Ebola in babies have historically been reported, but experts suspect transmission might happen via breast milk or close contact with infected parents. Ebola is typically spread by infected bodily fluids.

The World Health Organization also has noted that health centers have been identified as a source of Ebola transmission in this outbreak, with injections

of medications "a notable cause."

So far, more than 400 children have been left orphaned or unaccompanied in this outbreak as patients can spend weeks in treatment centers, UNICEF said. A kindergarten has opened next to one treatment center in Beni "to assist the youngest children whose parents are isolated" there, it said.

Health experts have said this Ebola outbreak, the 10th in Congo, is like no other as they face the threat of attack from armed groups and resistance from a wary population in a region that had never faced an Ebola outbreak before. Tracking suspected contacts of Ebola victims remains a challenge in areas controlled by rebels.

The latest WHO assessment, released Thursday, simply calls the circumstances "unforgiving."

And now, Congo is set to hold a presidential election on Dec. 23, with unrest already brewing.

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