Medical Xpress

Uganda declares first Ebola death since 2019

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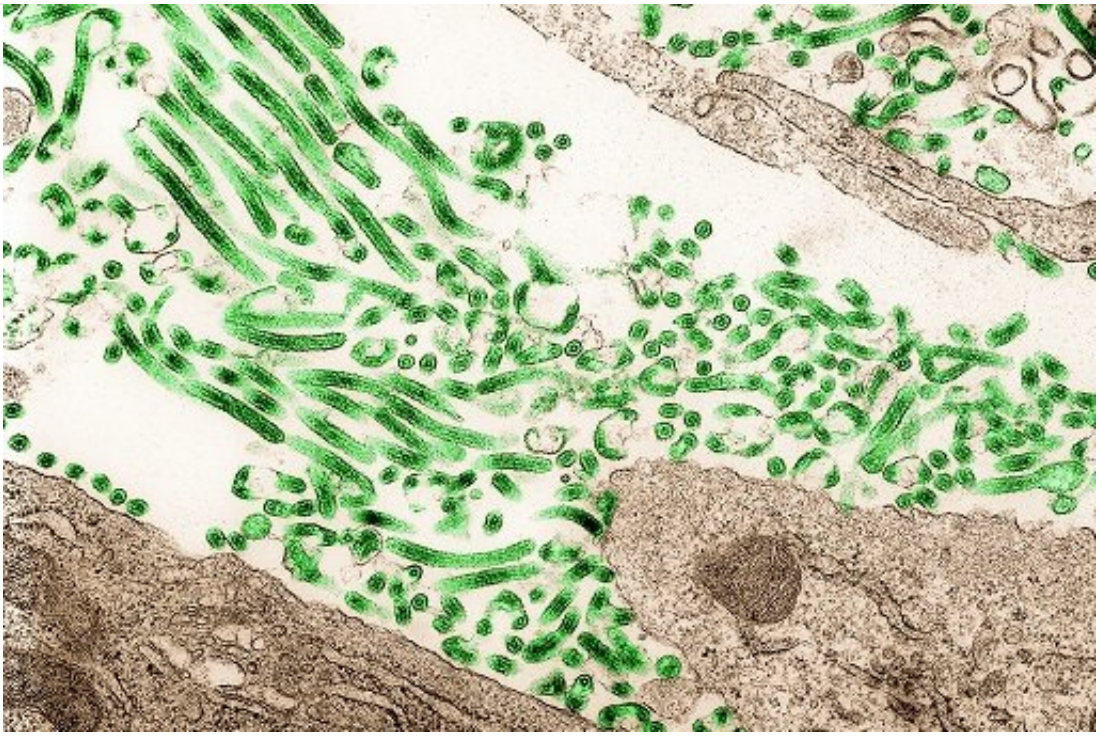

Ebola virus. Credit: NIAID

Uganda's health ministry on Tuesday announced the country's first fatality from the highly contagious Ebola virus since 2019, declaring an outbreak in the central district of Mubende.

"The confirmed case is a 24 year old male... (who) presented with EVD symptoms and later succumbed," the ministry said on Twitter, using an abbreviation for Ebola virus disease.

In a statement released earlier on Tuesday, the World Health Organization said a 24-year-old man in Mubende had tested positive for "the relatively rare Sudan strain" of the virus.

"This follows an investigation by the National Rapid Response team of six suspicious deaths that have occurred in the district this month," WHO said.

Eight other suspected patients were undergoing treatment, WHO said.

"This is the first time in more than a decade that Uganda is recording the Ebola Sudan strain," WHO Africa Director Matshidiso Moeti said.

"We are working closely with the national health authorities to investigate the source of this outbreak while supporting the efforts to quickly roll out effective control measures."

There have been seven previous outbreaks of the Sudan strain, including four times in Uganda and thrice in Sudan, the WHO said.

Uganda—which shares a porous border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—has experienced several Ebola outbreaks in the past, most recently in 2019, when at least five people died.

The DRC last month recorded a new case in its violence-wracked east, less than six weeks after an epidemic in the country's northwest was declared over.

At present there is no licensed medication to prevent or treat Ebola, although a range of experimental drugs are in development and thousands have been vaccinated in the DRC and some neighbouring countries.

Uganda's Health Minister Jane Ruth Aceng Ocero told AFP the authorities had started vaccinating frontline workers, including customs officials, at the border with DRC.

"As the investigations in the confirmed case are on, we have stepped up surveillance and contact tracing of the confirmed case," Aceng said, adding that they had deployed 12,000 doses of the Ebola vaccine.

Often fatal

Ebola is an often fatal viral haemorrhagic fever. The death rate is typically high, ranging up to 90 percent in some outbreaks, according to the WHO.

First identified in 1976 in the DRC (then Zaire), the virus, whose natural host is the bat, has since set off a series of epidemics in Africa, killing around 15,000 people.

Human transmission is through body fluids, with the main symptoms being fever, vomiting, bleeding and diarrhoea.

Outbreaks are difficult to contain, especially in urban environments.

People who are infected do not become contagious until symptoms appear, which is after an incubation period of between two and 21 days.

The worst epidemic in West Africa between 2013 and 2016 killed more than 11,300 alone. The DRC has had more than a dozen epidemics, the deadliest killing 2,280 people in 2020.

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