

## Ebola Outbreak in Democratic Republic of Congo

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Ebola. Congo. Outbreak. All three words sound familiar to us, but how much do we actually know about this ongoing crisis?

It's been more than a year since a new Ebola outbreak was declared in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); 3204 total cases, 3090 confirmed cases and 2142 deaths<sup>1</sup>. The country's largest ever Ebola outbreak and the second biggest Ebola epidemic ever recorded. How come it seems that the Western world is not aware of the dimension of the problem? Is media coverage of health crises in non-Western world countries enough?

**3,204** **3,090** **2,142**  
TOTAL CASES      CONFIRMED CASES      TOTAL DEATHS

Let's take a look back to 2014 when the West Africa Ebola outbreak, the biggest Ebola epidemic to date, shook the whole world specially when it seemed possible that it could hit Europe. That's when international media raised awareness about the epidemic, and for some time, front pages of multiple European newspapers were filled with articles related to the cases that had reached Europe. After this boom of awareness about the issue, the outbreak in Africa still lasted over a year more, but it seems that since Europe was no longer in danger, Ebola was no longer "trending topic" in our continent.

But wait, so what's Ebola? Why is it so deadly? And what weapons do we have to fight against it? To make a long story short, Ebola is a virus named after the

Ebola river, and... guess where it's located. Bingo. Democratic Republic of Congo. It causes a hemorrhagic fever, and it's as bad as it sounds, meaning patients start with common viral symptoms, specially fever, abdominal pain or diarrhea, making an early diagnosis difficult, but this can progress to internal hemorrhages which can lead to a multiorgan failure and death. There's no specific treatment for it so basically, hemodynamic support, pain comfort and general measures is as much as we can do for these patients. Mortality rates range from 25 to 90% and it's highly contagious, which means that whenever a case is confirmed a quick response is essential to prevent the spread of the disease. After the 2014 outbreak, a vaccine was developed, and it's currently being trialed as a control strategy in the DRC epidemic to protect Frontline workers and first and second degree contacts of confirmed Ebola patients.



Taking a closer look to what's happening in DRC, the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2018 the outbreak was declared in the northeast

<sup>1</sup> Figures as of 5<sup>th</sup> October 2019 provided by DRC Ministry of Health via WHO – MSF.

of the country. Since then the numbers haven't stopped growing, and from June 2019 some cases have been confirmed in neighboring Uganda and Goma, the capital of North Kivu province, a city of one million people. Due to this, in July 2019 the World Health Organization declared the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).

Widespread violence across the country makes population displacement common, and with that, the spread of the disease. This situation also compromises medical help, with attacks and explosions limiting NGOs actions on the field. But there's another relevant factor to consider, community mistrust towards the medical aid response. During this outbreak, attacks have been directed specifically towards Ebola

Treatment Centers (ETC) and Ebola healthcare workers have been killed by assailants, which not only makes controlling the outbreak more challenging, but also contributes to an increase in insecurity related to the medical response, which discourages people with symptoms from seeking care, leading to the spread of the virus across the healthcare system. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) believes that it will not be possible to end this outbreak if there is no trust built between the medical response and the local community, and that Ebola-related activities should be integrated into the existing healthcare system.

Raising international awareness is the first step towards putting an end to this epidemic which has already swept over 2000 lives.