

Uganda declares itself Ebola-free after swiftly turning tide on outbreak

Uganda on Wednesday declared the end of a nearly four-month Ebola outbreak that it briefly struggled to contain but was then able to swiftly bring under control despite the absence of a proven vaccine against the viral strain in question.



Source: Reuters. Uganda health minister Jane Ruth Aceng addresses the media after receiving a shipment of 1,200 doses for Ebola vaccine candidates set to be used in a clinical trial at the National Medical Stores in Entebbe, Uganda, 8 December, 2022.

"We have successfully controlled the spread of Ebola in Uganda," health minister Jane Ruth Aceng said during a ceremony to mark the outbreak's end.

Aceng said this was Uganda's eighth Ebola outbreak since 2000, when the country recorded its first and most deadly one that killed more than half of the 425 people it infected.

The latest outbreak killed 55 of the 143 people infected since September, according to health ministry figures. Six of the fatalities were health workers.

Wednesday's declaration followed Uganda's completion of 42 days with no active cases, which represents two full incubation periods of the virus.

In the early weeks of the outbreak, cases spread beyond the epicentre of Mubende, 150 km (90 miles) west of the capital Kampala, to several other districts, including Kampala.

The director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, praised Uganda for its response to the virus.

"Uganda has shown that Ebola can be defeated when the whole system works together, from having an alert system in place to finding and caring for people affected and their contacts, to gaining the full participation of affected communities in the response," he said in a statement.

Uganda's President, Yoweri Museveni said a two-week delay in declaring the outbreak after the first probable death from Ebola meant "the opportunity for immediate quarantine of contacts was lost".



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But health officials were able to turn the tide on the disease by November after imposing a lockdown on affected districts.

Ebola spreads through contact with the bodily fluids of an infected person and has a fatality rate of about 50%. More than 11,300 people died during the 2013-2016 outbreak in West Africa.

Unlike the more common strain of the virus, Ebola Zaire, which has been behind several recent epidemics in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, the strain behind Uganda's outbreak, Ebola Sudan, has no proven vaccine.

Even so, experts said Uganda's experience battling previous outbreaks of Ebola and its viral cousin Marburg helped its response.

Uganda's speed in ultimately containing cases, however, meant planned trials of vaccine candidates never got off the ground.

In December, Uganda received three vaccines - one by the University of Oxford and Serum Institute of India, another by Sabin Vaccine Institute and a third by Merck - for use vaccinating people in contact with confirmed cases.

But by that point, there were no new cases. The WHO said experts would meet on 12 January to discuss the next steps for the vaccines.

Sabin chief executive, Amy Finan said preparing for the trials had nevertheless taught health officials lessons for rolling out trial in the future, including how to engage with communities.

"Hopefully we won't have another outbreak soon, but if we do, we'll be better prepared than ever for it," she said.

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