

UGANDA: EBOLA OUTBREAK

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The Disaster

An outbreak of Ebola Haemorrhagic Fever was confirmed on Saturday 14 October 2000 in Gulu district in northern Uganda. By Thursday 26 October 2000, an estimated 175 persons had been reported as infected with the disease, out of whom 63 had died, and 57 recovered. More cases are continuing to arrive in Gulu hospital and the full extent of the epidemic is unknown at this time. In a race against time, the Uganda Red Cross Society (URCS) supported by the International Federation and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), is mobilising its resources to fight the further spread of the deadly disease in Gulu and the surrounding nine districts. A joint URCS, Federation and ICRC Task Force is working closely with the Ministry of Health and World Health Organisation (WHO) to coordinate local and international efforts to provide medical supplies and to assist with transport and personnel. Red Cross volunteers will disseminate information about the disease and its transmission to vulnerable communities in the densely populated and conflict affected districts of Northern Uganda.

Ebola is a highly contagious and deadly disease for which there is no known cure and which kills 90% of all persons exposed to it. Its symptoms are manifested in high fever, headache, muscular pain, diarrhoea, failure to pass urine and massive haemorrhaging with uncontrollable bleeding from all body orifices.

Ebola has been dormant since its last outbreak in Kikwit in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1995 when it killed 245 people. First news of the new outbreak came in an announcement by the Ugandan Minister of Health on national radio and television on 14 October, 2000. The World Health Organisation suspects that this disease could have started in September 2000 but has only now reached epidemic proportions. There have also been suspected cases in the neighbouring district of Kitgum. These districts are affected by ongoing conflicts between the Government of Uganda and rebel groups and are host to over 400,000 refugees and internally displaced persons living in camps with poor sanitary conditions. As a precaution against the rapid spread of the disease, all schools in Gulu district have been closed until the situation improves.

Uganda remains one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world and has limited capacity to cope with the crisis. The country is struggling to recover from twenty years of political unrest, to combat internal conflicts and insecurity on some of its national borders, and to fight a HIV/AIDS pandemic. In the absence of a strong public rural health network, the URCS is in a unique position to provide trained volunteers to assist the Ministry of Health to disseminate

information about the ebola fever outbreak in the hard-to-reach communities of Gulu and surrounding districts.

The Response so far

The government and the WHO carried out a comprehensive needs assessment in the affected Gulu district and have identified a number of immediate needs. The URCS, the Federation and the ICRC have confirmed these needs, and will complement the overall response co-ordinated by the Ministry of Health, together with the WHO, at the national and district levels.

Government Action w

The Ministry of Health has instructed that all persons believed to have died of the disease be buried immediately and has warned against cultural practices such as the washing of bodies. The Government also announced that all bodies should be buried by the appropriate authorities so as to avoid further spread of the disease during burial ceremonies. An international team of WHO experts has reached Gulu and is helping the government contain the disease and also trace the origin of the outbreak. Special protective wear and safety equipment has been distributed to those directly dealing with the disease.

A national task force formed two years ago to monitor processes and outbreak of diseases was immediately activated and is meeting daily in Kampala at the Ministry of Health Headquarters. All concerned agencies, including the Uganda Red Cross Society and the ICRC, have been attending these daily co-ordination meetings. Another co-ordinating body meeting twice a day has been established in Gulu town. The URCS Gulu branch together with ICRC Gulu sub-delegation attend these meetings. Press conferences are organised once a day in Kampala and surveillance reports are currently issued twice a day. The Government has appealed to donors to provide support for its response to the crisis and several donors have responded with cash and in kind contributions. The Government has made an initial allocation of US\$500 million (approximately USD 275,000) to the Ministry of Health for its immediate response to the situation.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action w

Volunteers from the URCS are playing a crucial role in controlling the further spread of the virus. Fifty volunteers from the Gulu branch have already been trained by Ministry of Health and the WHO, and have been deployed to move house-to-house to disseminate information and assist in identifying possible cases. The URCS conducted a one day coordination and planning workshop for staff from each of the 11 target branches on 21 October. In addition, the URCS has supplied four hospital tents and ten tarpaulins to assist the hospitals in Gulu to create sufficient space for isolation of affected persons. Four stretchers, a tin of chlorine, knapsack sprayers and a vehicle have been made available to the branch. The Federation has supported the URCS with communications equipment for use in the operation area. 200-300 volunteers are undergoing ebola information dissemination training, ensuring better preparedness in meeting any further spread of the disease. Through WHO, ICRC has contributed drugs, IV fluids, heavy duty gloves, hygiene materials and body bags to the Ministry of Health. The ICRC has also mobilised support through its Gulu sub-delegation, with the provision of radio communications equipment, two vehicles with fuel and drivers, as well as assisting the URCS response with a vehicle and radio equipment. The Danish, British, and Spanish Red Cross have provided either technical expertise or funding support.

Frequent co-ordination meetings are being held in Kampala between the URCS, ICRC and the Federation. Local co-ordination meetings are also being held in Gulu, between URCS Gulu branch and the ICRC Gulu sub-delegation. URCS blood donor recruitment activities have been suspended in the target districts.

Other Agencies' Action w

The international team of WHO experts in Gulu is helping the government contain the disease, trace the origin, strengthen capacity in Gulu and co-ordinate information management. MSF is involved in the curative work and has ferried in drugs and experts to work on the patients. World Vision has donated non-food items and has mobilised 208 volunteers to be deployed for case search and locate as many suspected cases as possible. USAID donated cash and sent in six experts from the America based Centre for Disease Control (CDC). Additional expert support for laboratory services and the burial of ebola victims has been received from Germany. WFP is providing food in IDP camps, to patients in hospitals and to residents in areas where quarantine has been imposed. WHO is also liaising with major world press bodies such as Radio France International, BBC, CNN and Radio Canada at international level. Many local NGOs have also responded at both national and district levels.

Needs

Based on indications of local donor support, the immediate identified needs have been met, but further cash contributions are requested to cover training, transportation and logistics, and volunteer costs, as well as administrative support to the National Society.

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