

Congo ebola outbreak: Deadly virus and cholera killing HUNDREDS amid political unrest

DEMOCRATIC Republic of Congo is racing to contain a deadly cholera outbreak that has swept through conflict-ravaged villages and now spread to Lubumbashi, the country's second-biggest city, senior health official Modeste Balloy Kusiwa said.



Republic of Congo is racing to contain a deadly cholera outbreak (Image: ROBERTO SCHMIDT/AFP/Getty Images)

The cholera outbreak has killed more than 60 people in the south-eastern Katanga region, said the local health minister, who stressed that “dozens” of deaths had been recorded in Lubumbashi. The disease has killed 64 people since it broke out at the end of August, he continued. About 1,304 cases have been recorded. Cholera, which is endemic in DR Congo, is an acute diarrhoea disease that can kill within hours if left untreated.

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But the vast central African nation is currently battling not one but two deadly epidemics, putting a major strain on relief efforts.

More than 400 people have been killed in the outbreak of Ebola in east Congo that began in early August and has infected at least 658 people, health officials said last week.

The death rate in the current epidemic - the country's biggest and the world's second-largest in history - is more than 60 percent, according to World Health Organisation (WHO) data.

But repeated attacks by armed, violent rebels on civilians, Ebola patients, aid workers, Congolese soldiers and UN peacekeepers have hobbled efforts to contain the deadly disease.



The cholera outbreak has killed more than 60 people in the south-eastern Katanga region (Image: Thierry Falise/LightRocket via Getty Images)

Ebola spreads through contact with bodily fluids. It causes haemorrhagic fever with severe vomiting, diarrhoea and bleeding.

It is a severe, often fatal illness in humans. The outbreak is concentrated in North Kivu and Ituri provinces.

The WHO warned last week that the risk of the disease spreading across borders remains “very high” at national and regional levels and said it was working urgently with DR Congo and its neighbours - Uganda, Rwanda and South Sudan - to limit that possibility.

Global health teams in DR Congo have also expressed concern that the ongoing election dispute could deepen public distrust and allow the epidemics to spiral out of control.



Ebola has infected at least 658 people in Congo, health officials said last week (Image: ISAAC KASAMANI/AFP/Getty Images)



More than 400 people have been killed in the outbreak of Ebola in east Congo that began in August (Image: JOHN WESSELS/AFP/Getty Images)

Infectious disease expert Jeremy Farrar said: “When you have political instability, public health always suffers.”

Last month's election was supposed to mark DR Congo's first uncontested democratic transfer of power after 18 years of turbulent rule by outgoing President Joseph Kabila.

But independent monitors have since flagged major problems with the election, including faulty voting machines and polling stations where scores of Congolese were unable to cast their ballot.

The powerful Catholic Church, which had a 40,000-strong team of observers, has also denounced the result.

The political standoff escalated on Sunday after the country's top court backed the contested presidential election victory of Felix Tshisekedi. His main rival, runner-up Martin Fayulu, rejected the ruling, before calling for peaceful protests.

"Felix Tshisekedi will become the fifth president of the republic," government spokesman Lambert Mende said after the Constitutional Court ruled that a legal challenge to the result filed by Mr Fayulu was inadmissible.

Mr Fayulu, for his part, said the decision had opened the way to a "constitutional coup d'etat," prompting fears of more violence.

He added in another statement: "I am now considering myself as the sole legitimate President of the Democratic Republic of Congo."



The Democratic Republic of Congo's newly-elected President Felix Tshisekedi (Image: CAROLINE THIRION/AFP/Getty Images)

Mr Fayulu says Mr Tshisekedi and Mr Kabila cut a power-sharing deal, an accusation they both strongly deny.

Unrest over the vote has already killed some 34 people, wounded 59 and led to 241 "arbitrary arrests" in the past week, according to the UN human rights office.

Although the streets of the capital Kinshasa were calm on Sunday afternoon.

DR Congo is Africa's biggest copper and cobalt producer and also mines gold and diamonds. But it is one of the world's poorest countries with an annual budget of roughly £4 billion (\$5 billion).

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