News



A health care worker takes the body temperature of a man in Mangina, Democratic Republic of Congo, on Aug 8, 2018. Health experts began Ebola vaccinations in Congo's northeast village of Mangina for the latest deadly outbreak. (RNS/AP/Al-hadji Kudra Maliro)



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KAMPALA, Uganda — September 18, 2018
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Thousands of faithful in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo are staying home from church services to avoid contracting or spreading Ebola.

"We are staying in our homes. We can't go to church and worship together as Christians," said Daniel Sango, who spoke to Religion News Service by phone from Mangina, 24 miles southwest of the town of Beni in North Kivu. "People are afraid of contracting the virus. Many are listening to the gospel of God on radio stations."

Thousands of churches remain closed in the country's eastern regions as the Ebola virus continues to spread. Since August, when the latest outbreak was declared in eastern Congo, 137 confirmed or probable cases have been registered, including 92 deaths, according to the country's health officials.

In a bid to contain the virus, religious leaders and officials have urged residents not to meet in big numbers.

Earlier this year, three Ebola patients left a treatment center in the northwestern city of Mbandaka and attended a church service, where they came into contact with other congregants. The three patients were later found dead in their homes.

"People should not meet in big number either in church or elsewhere," said pastor Sarah Kalenga of the Church of Jesus Christ in a telephone interview from Mangina. "We are finding ways to end the spread of the virus. People should pray from their houses and God will answer those prayers. We are trusting in God, but we should not tempt him."

Ebola, which is spread through close contact with the blood, secretions, organs or other bodily fluids of those infected, is highly contagious and can kill within days.

The virus returned to Congo only days after a previous outbreak that killed 29 people was declared over in July.

Two new cases were reported in Butembo last week, according to UNICEF.

"Butembo is an important commercial city and has nearly one million inhabitants. So there is a real risk the virus could spread quickly in such a large population center," Gianfranco Rotigliano, UNICEF representative, said in a statement last week. "The number of confirmed Ebola cases in Butembo remains limited, but we have to ensure that everything is being done now to ensure that the outbreak is controlled at this early stage."

Religious leaders in May suspended sacraments during the Ebola outbreak to help protect worshippers from contracting the disease.

"Although Masses are continuing, sacraments such as baptism and confirmation have had to be suspended," Monsignor Jean-Marie Bomengola, secretary of the church's Social Communications Commission, told Catholic News Service during the summer.

The Rev. Lucien Ambunga, a Catholic pastor, was quarantined after being infected with Ebola in Mbandaka town. The priest survived after being taken to a treatment center in Bikoro, a small town in northwestern Congo. The government said the priest became infected while praying as he placed his hands on an Ebola patient in his parish.

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Measures have now been taken to help prevent the spread of Ebola virus in this central Africa republic. The government and the World Health Organization said an Ebola vaccination program is underway for high-risk populations in the eastern part of the country, including North Kivu.

"Vaccines are an important tool in the fight against Ebola," said Oly Ilunga, the country's minister of health. "This is why it has been a priority to move them rapidly into place to begin protecting our health workers and the affected population."

Officials are doing what they can to encourage locals' cooperation with prevention measures.

"We have decided to make treatment free to remove the financial barrier that could dissuade the population from going to the health center," said Bathe Tambwe, an official in charge of coordinating the fight against the disease in eastern Congo.

However, some locals have dismissed use of the Ebola vaccine, saying it does not work. Many said they are prevented from mingling with others or even going to church after being vaccinated.

The mystery of the Ebola virus has left some locals believing that it is a curse or the result of evil spirits and that it can only be solved by prayers and fasting.

"I don't think this is normal disease that doctors can handle. It's brought by evil spirits as a punishment to the community," said Sango, 30, a father of two who owns a butchery in Mangina. "We need to come together as a community and ask God for forgiveness for the sins we committed."

Meanwhile, Christians in the eastern part of the country continue to pray at home for the end of Ebola and also to keep up the faith.

"Some of us have turned our houses to be churches. We sing, dance and pray to move closer to God. We read our Bibles and pray so that the Holy Spirit can guide us," said Sango.