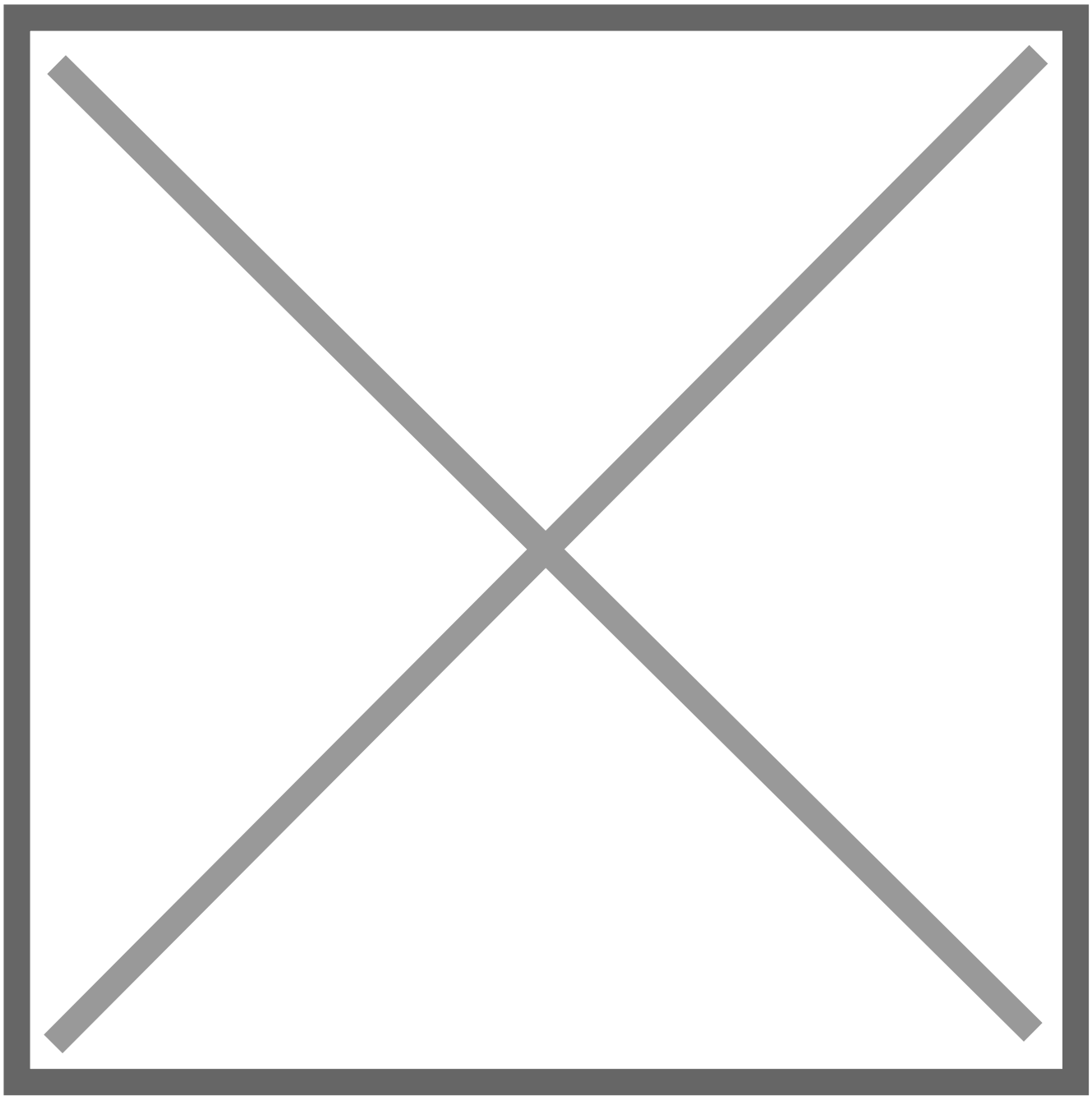
News



A health worker takes the temperature of a woman passing through the Kanyaruchinya checkpoint into the city of Goma, Congo May 20, 2026, as authorities and aid agencies intensify efforts to contain a new Ebola outbreak caused by the Bundibugyo strain. (OSV News/Reuters/Arlette Bashizi)

Frederick Nzwili

View Author Profile



OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Kinshasa, Congo — May 21, 2026
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Catholic bishops in Uganda have urged the people to remain calm after the government postponed the annual Martyrs Day celebrations, following an Ebola outbreak in the East African region.

The epidemic caused by Bundibugyo virus — one of the several that cause the disease in humans — has hit Congo and Uganda.

By May 20, at least 139 people had died out of the suspected 600 cases in Congo. Of the 600 suspected cases, the WHO said 51 had been confirmed in the country's northern provinces of Ituri and North Kivu.

An American doctor who contracted Ebola in Congo has been flown to Germany for treatment, along with his wife and four children. Peter Stafford, a surgeon and leader of the Christian missionary group Serge, operated on a patient with Ebola — not knowing the patient was infected and before the outbreak was detected, The Guardian reported.

But as the disease spreads, its impact is being felt among the Catholic community in Africa, as it forces the postponement of the Uganda Martyrs Day celebration. The event, marked every year on June 3 at Namugongo Shrine near Kampala, the capital, is one of the most important in the African Catholic and Christian calendars.

Millions of pilgrims travel for the event, with thousands walking long distances to the shrine, but now those who had started the journey this year have been urged to turn back.

Bishop Joseph Anthony Zziwa of Kiyinda- Mityana, president of the Ugandan bishops' conference, urged the people to remain calm, prayerful, united and hopeful following the postponement.

"The witness of the Uganda Martyrs continues to inspire the Church and the nation, reminding us that true faith is lived daily through love, sacrifice, truth and fidelity to God," said the bishop in a May 18 statement.

Zziwa encouraged the faithful to celebrate the day in parishes, following the guidance of the diocesan bishop and relevant government authorities, while stressing the commemoration as a profound witness of faith, courage, fidelity to Christ and "steadfast commitment to Christian values."

"Let us join in prayer for our nation, health workers and all those affected by the circumstances that necessitated the postponement," said the bishop.

Earlier, the nation's President Yoweri Museveni had announced the postponement of observances to a later date, reportedly after consultations with the national epidemic response task force and religious leaders.

"This decision was made because Uganda receives thousands of pilgrims annually from Eastern Congo, which is currently experiencing an Ebola outbreak. To safeguard everyone's lives, it is essential that this important event be postponed," said the president on May 17.

"I encourage those who had begun their journey to return home, continue observing the precautionary measures, report anyone who is sick, and encourage those who are ill to seek medical care."

Advertisement

The latest outbreak is the 17th since 1976 when Ebola was discovered in Congo. The most common clinical signs of the disease are fever, headaches and vomiting.

The current disease is caused by the Bundibugyo strain, which was identified in 2007 and is considered rarer, and there is no approved vaccine or specific treatment for it.

The Congolese Ministry of Public Health officially declared the new outbreak May 15. The World Health Organization May 17 further declared it a public health emergency of international concern, but said it had not reached pandemic levels.

According to an overview from the Provincial Health Division in Ituri, Congo, the first case was reported in late March in a town located some 50 miles from Bunia, the provincial capital of Ituri.

Since then, reports indicate that the epidemic is concentrated in the region characterized by severe overcrowding and intense population movement. It is in Ituri where an American doctor contracted Ebola.

Archbishop Marcel Utembi Tapa of Kisangani, Congo, said the people, especially those in Ituri province, were afraid of the virus, fearing that many in Mongwalu and Bunia towns were infected.

"As a church, we are calling on the government and the international community to step up efforts and work together to stop the epidemic," Tapa told OSV News.

The archbishop said he was pleased that the government was giving attention to the epidemic and some help was coming from outside. He urged the affected countries to work together against the epidemic.

"May God help his people," said the archbishop.

Meanwhile, Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. Church’s overseas relief and development agency, said it was rapidly mobilizing to support communities and limit further spread of the virus.

"It started slowly, but it is spreading quickly," said Rafaramalala Volanarisoa, CRS' head of office in Congo in May 20. "The fear is that there are many more unidentified cases. At the same time, health workers lack the equipment needed to protect themselves and care for patients."

CRS is leveraging partnerships with local church networks in Ituri and North Kivu, including local Caritas branches, to reach communities in remote and high-risk

areas, where trust is critical.

"The Catholic Church is deeply rooted" in Congo, said Volanarisoa. "Forty-five percent of health centers here are run by the Catholic Church. They can reach the remote villages, and people trust them. Those connections are going to be key to resolving this crisis."

Amid fear and increased misinformation, the organization is supporting community awareness and education, and delivering lifesaving information and early Ebola detection.