

In the heat of a February morning, a convoy left the morgue in Bunia headed for Mongbwalu in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Inside an ageing SUV was a wooden coffin carrying the body of a 44-year-old pastor.

The vehicle's back seats had been flattened to make space. Relatives crowded inside, and in a difficult twist of circumstance, some even sat on top of the coffin as the journey began.

The road across Ituri province is rough even on a good day. That morning, under a dry sun and on broken dirt tracks, the trip that should have taken around three hours stretched longer. The four-wheel drive jolted through potholes and gullies carved into the red earth, throwing up dust as it moved slowly forward.

By the time the convoy reached Mongbwalu, the coffin had cracked under pressure from the journey and the weight it carried.

That funeral, and the events around it, is now part of a wider investigation into the origins of a new Ebola outbreak in eastern DR Congo. Four members of the investigation team, working with the health ministry, say they are trying to trace what they describe as the possible "patient zero" in the unfolding epidemic.

They believe the difficult journey of the coffin may have played a role in what later became one of the earliest suspected super-spreader events: the funeral of Pastor Paluku Makundi Denis on February 4.

Health officials are now racing to contain an outbreak of a rare strain of Ebola that has spread through parts of the conflict-hit region. The virus has a fatality rate estimated between 30 and 50 percent and currently has no approved vaccine or cure.

According to the country's health ministry, there have been around 635 confirmed infections and at least 127 deaths so far, though officials warn the real numbers could be higher as surveillance efforts continue in hard-to-reach areas.

For investigators on the ground, the focus remains the same: piecing together the chain of transmission in a region where both geography and insecurity are making that task increasingly difficult.