

Ebola has now spread to eight provinces in the Democratic Republic of Congo, after North Ubangi confirmed its first cases, according to the latest epidemiological report from the Ministry of Public Health. As the outbreak widens, a row over money meant to fund awareness campaigns is adding pressure on the response.

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As of October 17, the Wapinda health zone had recorded two confirmed cases, one of them fatal. It is the only affected zone so far in a province that has eleven. On Monday, October 19, the Deputy Coordinator of the Public Health Emergency Operations Centre (PHEOC) said the National Institute of Public Health will back provincial health authorities in the response.

In a post on the institute's X account, he said the priorities are stronger surveillance and earlier detection of cases, more intensive contact tracing and follow-up, better coordination of health interventions, improved risk communication and community engagement, and wider adoption of preventive measures in communities.

"The objective is to contain the spread of the virus, protect populations and support a coordinated and effective health response," he said.

The epidemic was declared on May 15 and is the 17th Ebola outbreak recorded in the DRC. Since then, the virus has reached 66 health zones across North Ubangi, South Ubangi, Tshopo, South Kivu, North Kivu, Ituri, Haut-Uélé and Bas-Uélé.

Ituri remains the hardest hit, with 28 affected health zones. North Kivu follows with 17. Tshopo and Haut-Uélé have seven each, and Bas-Uélé has four. North Ubangi and South Ubangi each have one.

The report counts 9,455 confirmed cases since the outbreak began. Of those, 4,561 people have died and 2,530 have recovered. Forty new cases were confirmed in the latest reporting period, and 925 patients are currently in hospital. The overall case fatality rate stands at 48.2%. Contact tracing has reached 80%, a key measure for

slowing transmission.

Even as the virus moves into new territory, money earmarked for public awareness has become a source of political friction. For several days, national deputies from Ituri, North Kivu and Haut-Uélé have been at the centre of a controversy over how those funds were used, with accusations of mismanagement and calls for transparency.

According to information gathered by Radio Okapi, the Minister of Health handed envelopes of cash to the caucuses of national deputies from the affected provinces to boost community mobilisation and prevention. The North Kivu and Ituri caucuses reportedly received US\$150,000 each, and the Haut-Uélé caucus US\$50,000. The idea was to involve elected officials more closely in the response, given their ties to local communities.

In North Kivu, local actors want to know what was actually done in the health zones of Beni, Butembo and Lubero. National MP Elie Kambale has questioned the Minister of Health in the National Assembly, asking for the amounts promised and disbursed and a report on activities carried out on the ground.

Jeanine Kavira Katasohire, a national deputy elected from Butembo, says she received \$46,500 for awareness work in her constituency. She says \$9,300 of that bought hand sanitiser gel and thermal scanners for the Katwa and Butembo health zones. She also cites nine water boreholes built in schools, along with community and radio awareness campaigns.

Those explanations have not settled the matter. Observers still question how the caucus's full budget was spent. Civil society representatives told Radio Okapi on October 8 that if the misappropriation allegations are confirmed, they could damage community mobilisation efforts in the fight against the epidemic. They argue that MPs who received the money must account for it, especially given the health and social toll of the disease.

In Oïcha, political figure Emery Katavali is also urging the MPs concerned to explain how the funds were used.

Health authorities say they are continuing surveillance, treatment and awareness work to contain the epidemic and prevent new outbreaks in the affected provinces.

Source: Radio Okapi