European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

EU response to Ebola

What is it?

The Ebola virus disease is a severe and often fatal illness in humans. It is caused by a zoonotic virus that passes from animals to humans, spreading then further through human-to-human transmission. The disease can have a devastating impact on the security, economies, and healthcare systems of the affected regions. In both the West Africa (2014-2016) and the 10th Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (started in 2018), the EU mobilised political, financial, technical and scientific resources to help Ebola patients and contribute towards the international effort to contain the disease. The EU continues to support the World Health Organization (WHO) in the DRC, contribute to strengthening the health system in the country and to provide humanitarian assistance for Ebola survivors.

Why is this important?

The world woke up to the potential global threat of Ebola when, between 2014 and 2016, the disease reached previously unaffected countries in West Africa, leaving a huge death toll and paralysing economies.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) reported its first ever Ebola outbreak back in 1976. The disease returned in May 2018, when the DRC declared its 9th (in the west) and 10th outbreak (in the northeast, on 1 August, barely a week after the previous one had ended). On 17 July 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Ebola outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). 3,470 cases have been reported in the DRC, with 2,268 deaths. In 2019, 4 Ebola cases from the DRC were detected in Uganda, all of which were fatal, but no further spread was reported. No further active Ebola cases were registered in the 10th outbreak since the last Ebola patient in eastern DRC was discharged on 14 May 2020. Families and survivors, however, still need extensive health care and psychological support. The DRC is now grappling with a new Ebola outbreak – the 11th in the country – in the northeastern Equateur Province, with 22 cases confirmed and 13 deaths reported.

DRC areas affected by the 10th Ebola outbreak have seen armed conflict for the past 2 decades. The epidemic came on top of a fragile humanitarian situation – there are around 1 million internally displaced people struggling to get food, clean water and health services. Medical facilities and health workers have been attacked many times. The Ebola response worked on building trust by local communities, key to foster people's readiness to comply with follow-up treatment, vaccinations and safe burial practices.
How are we helping?

The European Union contributed significantly to the international response to the 10th Ebola epidemic in the DRC. The response was led by the national DRC authorities and the United Nations (UN), including the World Health Organization (WHO).

The response showed that an approach of inclusiveness, solidarity, and empathy towards the affected communities is central to the success of any response plan.

Guided by these principles, since August 2018, the European Union provided over €100 million for humanitarian and development projects to with the response plan. This support helped with:

- infection and prevention measures;
- work with local communities to promote understanding, acceptance and support of the response;
- social protection and nutritional support to survivors and their families;
- addressing the basic humanitarian needs of communities in Ebola-affected areas; and
- support for the national health sector to provide access to free and quality health care for those living in Ebola-affected areas.

In addition, the EU provided essential in-kind assistance on the ground through:

- EU humanitarian health experts and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) epidemiologists to support the international response;
- logistics support to aid workers on the ground through the EU’s humanitarian flight service (170 flights operated since May 2018);
- support to training on medical evacuation of humanitarian workers through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.

As from 2014, the EU also gave a significant contribution to Ebola research, including vaccines development, and provided over €230 million in funding for this purpose. Given the weak health system in the DRC, the EU has also been providing development funding, spanning over a number of years, to support the national health sector in the country (€180 million in total within the 11th EDF programme: 2014-2020).

In line with WHO guidelines, over 2018 and 2019, more than €6 million in EU humanitarian and development funds were allocated to help at-risk neighbouring countries (Uganda, South Sudan, Rwanda and Burundi) – strengthen their prevention and preparedness measures. Through its development programme, the EU is also supporting the national health systems of Burundi and South Sudan.

With the 10th Ebola outbreak declared over, the EU continues to contribute to support given to survivors. As the DRC is now grappling with the 11th Ebola outbreak in a different part of the country, the EU will continue to support the fight against Ebola.