European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

EU response to Ebola

What is it?

The Ebola virus disease (EVD) 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. When the main outbreaks occurred, the EU mobilised various resources to help Ebola patients and survivors, and to contain the disease.

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.

To date, the DRC has registered 12 EVD outbreaks, with the first one reported near the Ebola river in 1976. During the past 14 years, however, the resurgence of outbreaks has accelerated, with 9 out of 12 reported during this period. The 12th outbreak started in North Kivu, DRC, in February 2021, and was declared over in May 2021.

DRC areas affected by the 10th Ebola outbreak – the largest ever in the country and declared as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern – have also seen armed conflict for the past 2 decades. The epidemic came on top of a fragile humanitarian situation – around at least 1 million internally displaced people struggle to get food, clean water and health services.

Medical facilities and health workers were attacked many times. Building trust by local communities is key to foster people’s readiness to comply with follow-up public health advice, treatment, vaccinations and safe burial practices.

Guinea declared another outbreak in February 2021.
How are we helping?

DRC authorities lead the response with technical support by the United Nations (UN), including the World Health Organization (WHO), and other aid organisations. The European Union contributed significantly to the international response to Ebola outbreaks in the DRC.

Experience has shown that responding to an Ebola outbreak requires an approach of inclusiveness, solidarity, and empathy towards the affected.

Guided by these principles, the European Union provided over €100 million for humanitarian and development action in the context of Ebola outbreaks since August 2018. 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
- 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.

Since 2014, the EU has also made a significant contribution to Ebola research, including on vaccines development, Ebola treatments, and diagnostic tests, by providing over €230 million in funding. 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 (€222 million in total within the 11th EDF timeframe: 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.

Following the registration of new cases in the eastern DRC in February 2021, the EU remains in close contact with national authorities and the World Health Organization, and humanitarian partners to assess the situation and address eventual needs on the ground, and stands ready to help again in the fight against the disease.

In Guinea, in an immediate response to the outbreak, the EU mobilised a total of €3.2 million in humanitarian and development funding. This new funding will cover actions targeting the epicentre of the crisis, such as patient care, prevention, monitoring and follow-up of contact cases, awareness raising and coordination support.

In parallel, the EU supported other complementary actions, including the activation of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, through which Belgium, France and Germany sent consignments of personal protective equipment, protective medical garments, laboratory material and PCR testing kits to support hospitals and frontline healthcare staff in epidemics control.