

AFRICA

Rwanda Briefly Shuts Border With Congo Over Ebola Outbreak

Move, which came after a third case of the deadly virus was discovered in Goma, stranded thousands on both sides of the crossing



Thousands of Congolese and Rwandans cross between the two countries every day to trade in minerals and goods. Above, health authorities take a baby's temperature at a checkpoint in Goma. PHOTO: PATRICIA MARTINEZ/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Nicholas Bariyo and Gabriele Steinhauser

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Rwanda briefly shut its border with the Democratic Republic of Congo, escalating its response to an Ebola outbreak that has killed more than 1,800 people since the first case in Congo was discovered a year ago.

Rwanda's health ministry said the flow of goods and people between the two countries resumed Thursday afternoon after officials put in place plans to reinforce screening procedures and public safety.

"The ministry has advised against unnecessary travels to Goma-Eastern Congo, following increasing number of cases confirmed in DRC," the health ministry said in a statement.

The decision to temporarily close the border, which was quickly condemned by the Congolese government, came after a third case of the virus was discovered in Goma, a city of two million in Congo along the Rwandan border.

Thousands of people were stranded earlier Thursday on both sides of the crossing between Goma and the Rwandan town of Gisenyi, the busiest point along the roughly 100-mile border. Goma is the region's main trading hub for minerals including tin, tantalum and gold and the regional headquarters of many international aid organizations.

Despite warnings there is a high risk that the contagious virus could spread to neighboring countries, the World Health Organization and other aid groups have advised against closing borders. They say doing so would further hit the population of one of the world's poorest and conflict-ridden regions. Health officials say that stopping Congolese from trading, visiting families or going to work in neighboring countries could increase distrust in communities that are already resisting treatment and vaccination efforts.

There haven't been any cases of Ebola in Rwanda, but in June, neighboring Uganda said it had diagnosed three members of a Congolese family with the virus. Last month, the WHO reported that a Congolese woman, who was already showing symptoms of the hemorrhagic fever, had sold fish at a Ugandan market days before she died in an Ebola treatment center in her home country. The WHO that day declared the outbreak a global health emergency.

The Ebola virus is transmitted between humans through bodily fluids, like blood, sweat or saliva. Rwanda has set up an Ebola treatment center and vaccinated about 3,000 doctors, nurses and other health-care providers in preparation for a possible spread, according to the health ministry.



Congolese customs agents gathered at the border crossing point with Rwanda on Thursday. PHOTO: STRINGER/REUTERS

Congolese and international health

officials have failed to stop Ebola's spread in eastern Congo, where at least 1,813 people had

died and 2,701 had been infected as of Tuesday. It is the world's second most deadly outbreak of the virus, surpassed only by the West African epidemic that killed more than 11,300 people between 2014 and 2016, and the first in an active conflict zone.

Many Congolese locals, traumatized by a quarter-century of violence and neglect by the government in Kinshasa, are refusing to seek treatment when they fall sick, putting relatives and neighbors at risk. That, along with attacks on health workers and burial teams, has undermined advances in the treatment and prevention of Ebola since the 2014 epidemic.

More than 180,000 Congolese have received an experimental Ebola vaccine, which the WHO says has proved highly effective in protecting people from contracting the virus and significantly improves their chances of survival if they have already been infected. Patients diagnosed in Congo are also getting one in four experimental Ebola treatments.

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