

Northeast DRC EBOLA OUTBREAK – Elections Crisis

CRISIS INFO # 1 (08.01.2019)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

On 20 December, 2018, the long awaited presidential elections that were originally supposed to take place on 22 December were delayed until 30 December. This decision caused tensions throughout the country, especially in areas such as Beni and Butembo in eastern North Kivu Province, which are considered opposition strongholds. On Wednesday 26 December, the national electoral commission (CENI) announced that elections will be further postponed in three areas including Beni and Butembo because of the ongoing Ebola outbreak and risks of attacks. This announcement resulted in violent protests, especially in Beni where the MSF transit centre was partly vandalized on 27 December, leading to the temporary evacuation of the MSF teams for a few hours. Initial MoH reports talking about patients who fled during the troubles were amplified by some media who reported that dozens of suspected Ebola cases would have fled. In Butembo the situation has been quieter than in Beni. There have been demonstrations but no significant episodes of violence have occurred.

Elections took place on 30 December with no major security incidents. Since Beni and Butembo had been excluded from the electoral process, youth groups organized their own independent vote in the streets of Beni. The CENI has declared that those independent votes will not be taken into consideration. Preliminary results of the elections were supposed to be announced on January 6. However, the announcement has been postponed by a week for the time being. Following the elections day, internet access and the SMS network have been shut down in DRC. The EU ambassador was invited to leave the country, while radio station RFI's broadcast was cut off. It is possible that the announcement of the results will cause protests around the country.

On what concerns the Ebola outbreak itself, the number of new cases continues to grow. As of 7 January, there have been 577 confirmed cases, 329 of which have died.

MSF ACTIVITIES

In North Kivu, MSF is responding to the Ebola outbreak in Beni (with a transit centre), Butembo (with an Ebola treatment centre) and Katwa (eastern part of Butembo city, where MSF has just opened a second Ebola treatment centre). MSF is also providing outreach and community awareness-raising activities, as well as support to health centres on infection prevention and control.

BENI transit centre

On 27 December, the transit centre managed by MSF in Beni was targeted by protesters, who threw stones, broke into the centre and looted small equipment. These acts of violence led to a temporary evacuation of the MSF team. A medical team quickly returned to care for the patients present in the transit centre. Of the 28 patients that were in the transit centre at the time of the demonstrations, 9 left spontaneously during the troubles, 18 were referred to Beni's general hospital and 1 was discharged. As no patients remained in the transit centre, the medical team remained on standby at the project's base, waiting for the situation to quiet down. On 31 December activities resumed with reduced staff.

Beni transit centre patient numbers as of 07/01/2019:

- 9 new admissions
- 17 discharged patients (17 tested negative for Ebola)
- 33 patients in total in the transit centre

BUTEMBO Ebola treatment centre

Activities at the ETC are proceeding as normal but with reduced teams. On 27 December the decision was taken to temporarily evacuate all non-essential staff because of the tense climate created by the elections and the coming proclamation of results.

Butembo ETC patient numbers as of 07/01/2019:

- 13 new admissions
- 22 discharged patients (1 cured, 2 deceased, 19 tested negative for Ebola)
- 44 patients in total in the ETC

KATWA Ebola treatment centre (in construction)

The new ETC in Katwa (eastern part of Butembo city) was inaugurated on 3 January, with the opening of 16 beds. On 4 January, the first 3 patients were admitted. The centre has a modular design that allows construction to go on while being operational. Another 16 beds are planned to be available soon.

Katwa ETC patient numbers as of 07/01/2019:

- 3 new admissions
- 6 discharged patients (6 tested negative for Ebola)
- 8 patients in total in the ETC

Outreach, community awareness-raising and infection prevention and control

MSF was running these activities in communities and health centres in and around Beni and Butembo. Due to the current insecurity, they have been temporarily suspended, with the exception of occasional, ad-hoc decontamination of health centres. MSF teams are ready to resume the bulk of these activities as soon as the situation allows.

Q&A

Q: A number of patients fled from your transit centre in Beni. Do they represent a danger for the population?

A: Our centre in Beni is a transit centre and not an Ebola treatment centre. The function of the transit centre is to help with triage and care for patients showing non-specific symptoms of Ebola that could also be attributed to other illnesses such as malaria or other common infectious diseases. Since the opening of the centre, the great majority of patients cared for tested negative for Ebola. Of the 28 patients that were in the transit centre at the time of the demonstrations, 9 left spontaneously, 18 were referred to Beni's general hospital and 1 was discharged.

Q: Why don't your patient figures from the Beni transit centre at the moment of the attack match the ones given by the MoH?

A: At the time of the communication given by the MoH, the situation was still unfolding. It was only in the evening that we could get the full picture and confirm figures. The updated information has been also communicated to the MoH.

Q: Did the looters enter the high-risk area of the transit centre? Was the material that they took potentially contaminated?

The looters did not enter the high-risk area of the transit centre and did not take material that is potentially contaminated.

Q: Have all the MSF staff been evacuated? Has MSF suspended all its activities?

A: No. While the amount of staff in the projects was reduced, MSF teams are still on the ground. The transit centre in Beni has reopened on 31 December. The Katwa Ebola treatment centre was inaugurated on 3 January. In Butembo, patient care activities at the ETC continue.

Q: Why has the Ebola response been targeted?

The Ebola outbreak was presented as one of the reasons for postponing elections in certain areas of DRC, including Beni and Butembo. It is understandable that actors taking part in the Ebola response are then perceived by the population as being partly responsible for the postponement of the elections. Our priority is to engage with communities and youth groups to share information about Ebola, our patient care and treatment activities, and the importance of infection prevention and control measures.

Q: What are the consequences of the unrest on the outbreak response?

The current situation is causing delays on surveillance, identification of new cases, contact tracing, vaccination and infection prevention and control activities, such as safe and dignified burials and decontamination of health centres and households. This can lead to a higher rate of propagation of the disease, potentially increasing the time it will take to bring the outbreak under control.

But the impact of the violence on people's access to health goes well beyond Ebola care. During the protests, several health centres were targeted and damaged. This leaves the population with a limited access to medical care that can have a serious impact on the overall health of the population and on the monitoring of the outbreak. This is why transit centres like the one managed by MSF in Beni are important. They allow decreasing the caseload on the local health structures by triaging patients with non-specific symptoms and by referring them to the appropriate health centres for the care they need.

Q: Is the person who was evacuated to the US for monitoring after a potential exposure to Ebola an MSF staff?
See article here for info: <https://www.nebraskamed.com/biocontainment/ebola/american-to-be-monitored-at-medical-center-after-possible-ebola-exposure>

A: No, the person evacuated to the US for monitoring after a potential exposure to Ebola is not an MSF staff member.