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Resurgence of Ebola in Democratic Republic of Congo threatens country facing COVID-19 and famine

March 12 2021

Health providers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are struggling to contain fresh cases of Ebola virus, less than a year after the country's tenth outbreak of the deadly virus was declared over.

So far, 11 cases and four deaths have been confirmed by the Ministry of Health around the city of Butembo in North Kivu province.

Reports of the outbreak have been met with distrust and resistance from some community members, reflecting the past suspicions and even hostilities towards medical and aid workers, witnessed during previous Ebola outbreaks. This risks increasing the vulnerability of the most marginalised members of the community to spread of the disease.

"This Ebola outbreak has had the greatest impact on women and children," says Lulu Mitshabu, Caritas Australia Program Coordinator for Africa. "When children lose their parents, their future becomes uncertain. As they are often primary caregivers, women are often at risk of being infected or stigmatised."

This Ebola outbreak also comes as the country struggles with the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 with 26,626 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 712 deaths reported to World Health Organisation since the outbreak of the pandemic.

There are fears that the economic impacts of COVID-19 could exacerbate the already high levels of food insecurity in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, as some communities have become increasingly vulnerable due to lockdowns.

"Many households missed the planting season and were unable to travel to markets sell their products, forcing families to start eating food stored for the dry season," says Ms Mitshabu.

In response to the combined threat of Ebola and COVID-19, Caritas Australia and its partners in the Democratic Republic of Congo are working through local church networks to raise awareness about the outbreaks.

Caritas Australia's partners have implemented training sessions on community knowledge and understanding preventive measures on COVID-19 in three provinces. They also distributed hygiene kits including masks, buckets, hand sanitizer, soap and posters.

"I am always inspired by the courage and strength that communities display," says Ms Mitshabu. "Despite all odds, they come together to find their own solutions to challenges around peace, protection and livelihood opportunities to improve their own and their family's future."

The Catholic agency for international aid and development

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Ms Mitshabu has been working for Caritas Australia for 20 years, after fleeing the Democratic Republic of Congo while working for a women's rights organization, at a time when women who spoke up for their rights were considered enemies of the state.

In the decades since, she has worked on Caritas Australia programs in the Democratic Republic of Congo which focus on gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS and the re-integration and protection of ex-combatants, helping them to transition from military to civilian life.

Caritas Australia is a member of Caritas Internationalis, one of the world's largest humanitarian networks in the world with 162 agencies operating in 200 countries and territories.

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