

# Renewed Ebola outbreak threatens the Congo as COVID-19 spreads

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23 April 2020

Already afflicted by a growing COVID-19 pandemic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has seen three new Ebola cases including two deaths in recent weeks, marking a resurgence of the Ebola epidemic. A catastrophe threatens millions not only in the DRC but across central Africa.

In the city of Bény in eastern DRC, one of the epicenters of the Ebola epidemic that broke out on August 1, 2018 and that has claimed 2,276 victims, a child died of hemorrhagic fever on April 10. Two days later, a 26-year-old man died of the same causes. According to a communiqué on the Multi-region Committee on Fighting the Ebola Virus, “it was a co-patient of the case confirmed on April 10.”

The number of people sickened with Ebola could rise rapidly and threaten to relaunch the epidemic, as health authorities have already identified 28 contacts of the new Ebola patient, “including 26 co-patients and two health service providers, one of whom is vaccinated.” Health authorities also reported the World Health Organization (WHO) was preparing Monday to officially announce the end of this 10th Ebola epidemic in the DRC. There had been no new cases of Ebola in the last 52 days.

Along with the renewed threat from Ebola, Africa is being overtaken by the COVID-19 pandemic. The DRC now has 359 cases and 25 deaths, primarily in the capital, Kinshasa. Inside the ruling elite, associates of President Félix Tshisekedi have tested positive and others have died, including one task officer of the presidency, Jacques Ilunga. On April 15, Bishop Gérard Mulumba, the paternal uncle of Tshisekedi and head of his civilian cabinet, also died of COVID-19.

According to the state committee on fighting COVID-19, “the COVID-19 pandemic is entering into an exponential growth phase in the city-region of

Kinshasa. ... The high point of this growth will be reached between the first and second weeks of the month of May. In this period, we must expect rapid arrivals of patients in health authorities that will likely be overrun. If the current preparation efforts are not finalized in time, we must expect the worst.”

In the capital, a city of 12 million inhabitants, the La Gombe neighborhood—the epicenter of the pandemic within the DRC—has been on lockdown since April 6. However, in neighboring districts like Lingwala, Bandalungwa, Kintambo and Ngaliema, no measures have been taken.

The committee fighting COVID-19 reported that it “noted that social distancing measures are totally disrespected and fears that there will be intense human-to-human transmission of the virus in the critical period that is opening in the coming weeks.” It recommended “obligatory wearing of masks by everyone in all public spaces, and especially in mass transit and marketplaces,” as well as “extending confinement measures to districts located next to La Gombe.”

However, masks remain difficult to obtain in DRC, as in neighboring countries. In Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, wearing masks is mandatory; however, aware that Gabonese citizens cannot obtain medical masks, the government has recommended that they instead wear “alternative masks.” Many tailor shops in Gabon and elsewhere have begun making cloth masks, which are less effective but which nonetheless slow the spread of the coronavirus.

On Monday, the government of Chad had also decreed the mandatory wearing of masks on its territory, before rescinding its order the next day since masks are not available in Chad. Cameroon, one of the worst-hit African countries, with 1,163 cases and 43 deaths, had already adopted this measure last Thursday.

The explosion of COVID-19 cases and the recurring danger of Ebola, a highly contagious and lethal virus, underscore the enormous health dangers facing this region and the necessity of international coordination to ensure that necessary resources and treatments are available. This intervention will require the political mobilization of the working class in struggle, including to oppose renewed armed conflict and the maneuvers of the imperialist powers.

For a quarter century, the DRC has been torn apart by wars in which some 200 armed groups are fighting each other. It is currently the country that has seen the bloodiest war since World War II, with over 5 million dead. The DRC was the center of a regional war that lasted from 1996-1997 and again from 1998 to 2003, when various local and ethnic conflicts were poisoned by interimperialist rivalry between Washington and Paris—conflicts whose consequences still last today.

In 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a primarily Tutsi force linked to US interests, invaded Rwanda, which was then dominated by a genocidal, ethnic-Hutu regime backed by Paris. The French armed forces carried out Operation Turquoise, which protected the flight of Hutu units west into the DRC, including Interahamwe militias responsible for mass ethnic killings of Tutsis. These ethnic conflicts of the Rwandan war, bound up with US-French rivalries amid the collapse of the Mobutu dictatorship in the DRC, ultimately provoked all-out war across the Congo and the region.

Various regional powers—including Rwanda, Uganda, Angola and Zimbabwe—intervened into the conflict, which had moved from Rwanda to the DRC, creating their own militias. This prolonged the conflict and allowed multinational corporations to pillage Congo's mineral riches by developing links with the various local militias. This conflict led to a stalemate, in which militias and armies financed themselves by plundering local resources and terrorizing local populations.

Now, rivalries between Washington, the European imperialist powers, and China—a major economic power targeted by the imperialist powers with propaganda and military threats—again pose a grave danger in Africa.

Beyond armed conflict, the DRC has undergone intense social and political tensions in recent years, starting with the two-year delay of presidential elections by President Joseph Kabila, who had begun

moving closer to China. The elections were ultimately held in December 2018. Last year, amid growing rivalries with Beijing, Washington ordered some of its troops to deploy to Gabon, using the DRC situation to justify the deployment.

Félix Tshisekedi, who won the presidential election, was denounced by his opponents and by France, who petitioned to the UN Security Council. Protests broke out, and four people were killed.

Against epidemics, the population of DRC and neighboring regions cannot simply rely on existing health infrastructure, which is insufficient or even nonexistent. Workers and the oppressed rural masses are again facing the bankruptcy of capitalism in Africa. Whereas countries there, and above all the DRC, have vast national wealth, the ruling elites act—in the final analysis—in close collaboration with the imperialist powers, who use armed militias to pillage Congo's natural wealth and make enormous profits.

Without international coordination to fight COVID-19 and Ebola based on a scientific appraisal of Africa's health needs, a major health catastrophe is looming. The decisive question is the international political mobilization of the working class. As anger is mounting in the imperialist countries against governments that impose back-to-work orders with contempt for human life, it is essential to mobilize hundreds of billions of euros in health and industrial resources for Africa and to prevent a relapse into a generalized internal war as in the past in the Congo.



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