



Democratic Republic of the Congo

INSIGHT: The 11th Ebola response: assessing risk for health workers operating in Équateur Province

After the 11th Ebola outbreak was declared in the DRC on 1 June 2020, international aid and health organisations mobilised together with local health authorities to stem the spread of Ebola in the north-western Équateur Province.

To date, health efforts have been largely successful: there have been far fewer cases than in the 10th Ebola outbreak, which occurred in north-eastern DRC. The mortality rate, while still high, is significantly lower (45%, compared to 67% during the 10th Ebola outbreak).

There have also been few reported cases of violence against health workers, compared to over **400 reported** from eastern DRC. The general security context and better community relations are contributing factors to the more peaceful health response.

Nevertheless, local health efforts in Équateur Province in the context of the DRC's 11th Ebola outbreak have been accompanied by violent **industrial strikes** by local health workers, as well as allegations of **corruption and fraud involving high-ranking local health officials**, spurring **mentions** in the media of the existence of an “**Ebola business**”. Local newspapers reported that “**humanitarian workers**” were threatened by striking local health agents in several health zones.

Insecurity Insight is monitoring local reactions and discussions on the social media platform Facebook to better understand how these developments may impact aid programmes operating in the region.



The monitoring of Facebook indicates that, with some exceptions, coverage of the strikes and corruption allegations did not generate as much viral interest from local Facebook users in Équateur as would have been expected.

The atmosphere appears to be different from June 2020, when allegations of fraud **by local government and international organisations sparked protests in Mbandaka**.

A possible reason behind this low-profile reaction may be the **improving epidemic situation** in the region, and in particular the fact that the more recent outbreaks are scattered in small clusters across a vast area and not in urban centres, where the number of Facebook users is much higher.

Social media commentators mostly focus on the failure and perceived mistakes of local health systems rather than the international health response and aid workers.

Social media users have expressed some criticism related to alleged fictitiously employed local health workers, and there are widespread accusations among commentators of the existence of an “Ebola business”. This most likely indicates that corruption exists within the local health system. The fact that the revelations of corruption originated from the UK, US and Canadian governments via a **joint declaration** may also explain why the international aid sector is not directly blamed for corruption.



In sum, while existing frustrations surrounding payments and corruption have indeed resulted in some anger towards international organisations (see image below), nevertheless they do not appear to have resulted in any systematic targeting of international aid organisations on Facebook.

Overall, information collected by Insecurity Insight suggests that current local perceptions of international aid organisations appear to be, at the very worst, neutral. This is possibly linked to the more external role assumed by the international community.

The Ebola response in Équateur adopted an approach that sought to **decentralise the health response, empowering local health facilities and workers**, and thus limiting the need for health workers from outside the province. As a consequence, Facebook users do not appear to see the international health effort as being directly responsible for existing problems.

However, should specific allegations against aid organisations emerge – particularly if they are linked to the response in larger urban settlements such as Mbandaka – this perception could change.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The monitoring of local media should continue. Newspapers have employed the term “Ebola business”, even if this is sometimes a hypothetical accusation. An example of a Facebook post header used by a prominent DRC newspaper, Actualité.drc, is: **Ebola business dans la province de l'Équateur? Quelque chose ne tourne pas rond** (Ebola business in Équateur Province? Something is amiss).

This can affect the broader health efforts in the region and elsewhere in the DRC, and should be carefully monitored, especially in view of the spread of **misinformation surrounding vaccination and viruses in the past months**.

Community-engagement strategies should continue. The efforts to decentralise the health response in the region appear to have been **crucial to increasing trust among local communities**. However, community resistance to the use of swabs and recommendations regarding the holding of “safe and dignified burials” continues, and more work needs to be done to inform the population about the virus if security risks are to be kept as low as possible.

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