



Nathalie Kipenzi, a hygiene promoter, talks to displaced people during an awareness campaign for mpox Aug. 19, 2024, at the Muja camp for the internally displaced near Goma, Congo. The infectious disease is caused by the mpox virus and results in a painful rash, enlarged lymph nodes and fever. (OSV News/Arlette Bashizi, Reuters)

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As Congo remained the epicenter of the latest mpox outbreak, Catholic Church leaders in the country were calling for increased action, while expressing concern at the surging cases.

Over 500 people have died in Congo and almost 18,000 were infected — 94% of the global cases in 2024 — as the viral disease spread to East and Central Africa. Over 15 other African countries have reported cases and heightened surveillance. Of the two clades, or groups, of the virus, the focus is on clade 1, which scientists consider a high consequence infectious disease that spreads faster and wider. Nearly 70% of mpox infections in Congo are in children under 15.

On Aug. 21, Thailand became the latest country outside Africa to report a case, after Sweden, Pakistan and the Philippines.

In Congo "we are really concerned about the many cases," Archbishop Marcel Utembi Tapa of Kisangani told OSV News. "As a church, we are calling on the government to take care of people," he said, urging nongovernmental organizations to help the people.

Church's health institutions in the country were continuing offering relief, among others, as the disease marched on. The church provides more than 50% of the health care needs for people in the Central African country, also hit by a deadly rebel war in eastern provinces. The conflict in North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri provinces is fueled — analysts believe — largely by a struggle for control of the immense natural resources.

The church runs and supports over 2,000 health facilities, the highest number in Africa followed by Kenya, where it supports more than 1,000, and Nigeria with more than 500 church-run health centers. An estimated 52 million people out 90 million in the country — or approximately half of the population — are Catholics.

Mpox is a zoonotic disease, meaning it spreads between humans and animals. Although scientists discovered mpox — earlier known as monkeypox — in 1958, among monkeys kept for research in Denmark, it was not until 1970 when doctors found the first human case in Congo. However, United Nations health experts say the disease was neglected in Africa, until 2022, when a global outbreak was ignited.

The viral disease is transmitted through close contact between people, and sometimes between people and environment, through objects and surfaces that have been exposed to an infected person.

Its main symptoms include rash-like blisters which affect all parts of the body and which last from two to four weeks. The victim also gets a fever, headache, muscle aches and swollen lymph nodes, among other symptoms.

Relief agencies — among them Christian based ones — report that the category most affected by the disease are the many children who have been forced into the crowded refugee camps by the ongoing conflict.

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"People in ... Congo and other impacted countries need immediate free treatment for mpox. There must also be an immediate immunization program set up to prevent further infection and mortality. We cannot stand by while children die from this deadly but preventable disease," said Aline Napon, World Vision's national director in Congo, in a written exchange with OSV News.

On Aug. 14, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director general of the World Health Organization, declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern, while describing the rapid spread in Congo and the new cases reported in the neighboring countries as "worrying."

"It's clear that a coordinated international response is needed to stop these outbreaks and save lives," said Ghebreyesus, a former Ethiopian minister of health.

A day earlier the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared the outbreak a public health emergency of continental security and stated it was "a crisis that demands our collective action."

Tapa called on WHO "to respond quickly to the outbreak."

At the same time, medical charities were urging countries with considerable vaccine stockpiles, but not experiencing active outbreaks, to donate as many as possible to affected countries.

The United States and Japan have offered to donate vaccines, but WHO officials say the response is already a much-delayed one.

According to Dr. Dimie Ogoina, who chaired WHO's mpox emergency committee, negligence had led to a new, more transmissible version of the virus emerging in countries with few resources to stop outbreaks, The Associated Press reported.

Mpox had been spreading mostly undetected for years in Nigeria and elsewhere before the 2022 outbreak of the disease in more than 70 countries, Ogoina said at a virtual news conference.

"What we are witnessing in Africa now is different from the global outbreak in 2022," he said. While that outbreak overwhelmingly was focused in gay and bisexual men, mpox in Africa is now being spread via sexual transmission as well as through close contact among children, pregnant women and other vulnerable groups, AP said.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control said Aug. 22 that the Biden-Harris administration "has been closely monitoring the spread of mpox," specifically clade 1 mpox, "to prepare domestically" for a possible outbreak but emphasized "the risk to most Americans ... is very low, and there are no known cases in the United States at this time."

"The United States is well prepared to rapidly detect, contain, and manage clade I cases should they occur domestically," CDC added.