

Congo Measles Epidemic Kills At Least 210

✖ Infants born in the Congo today are battling two deadly diseases: measles and cholera.

Indeed, measles are spreading quickly in the African nation. According to the latest figures from local health authorities, 16,112 suspected cases of measles have been reported since early 2011. At least 210 are dead—90 in the Katanga province.

Measles is highly contagious, and can lead to pneumonia, severe dehydration, blindness and death, especially among children. When a population has not been vaccinated, measles can kill between one and 15 percent of afflicted children, according to Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). That number rises to 25 percent among those with impaired access to healthcare. It only cost \$1 for the vaccine.

Health and humanitarian workers report that the measles virus has spread beyond a few rural areas to cities and is poised to move beyond five provinces to the rest of the country.

Meanwhile, there is danger from a new cholera outbreak in and around Kisangani, in the north of the country. Cholera kills by causing an infection in the small intestine, which leads to severe dehydration.

Humanitarian missions are racing to the rescue.

MAF (Mission Aviation Fellowship) is airlifting emergency immunizations and humanitarian health workers into remote areas of Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) while the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the American Red Cross are working to increase the number of volunteers for the vaccination campaign.

“Even the few existing roads in DRC are in poor condition from lack of maintenance, and in the rainy season they’re totally impassible, hence air travel is the sole means of transport to most of the country,” says John Boyd, MAF president and CEO.

Garth Pederson, a Kinshasa-based MAF pilot, says MAF has flown 12 charter flights for MSF since January, including four within the last 10 days that transported 35 Congolese and European humanitarian health workers to Tshikapa in Kasai province, 350 miles east of Kinshasa. From there, workers travel by vehicle or motorcycle to outlying communities, Pederson says.

“The success of measles vaccination campaigns depends largely on spreading the word to communities,” says Dr Alain Kapete, from the Red Cross of the Democratic Republic of Congo. “Red Cross volunteers make door-to-door visits to ensure all children, especially those in remote villages, are included in the immunization campaign. We need to vaccinate as many children as possible to prevent the spread of the virus.”

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