

EBOLA: GOVT ISSUES TOUGH MEASURES FOR SCHOOLS

GRAPHIC BY PHILLIP NSAMBA

By John Musenze

Uganda's health ministry has issued new Ebola Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for schools ahead of their reopening for term two. The ministry says this is to ensure early detection, prevention and appropriate response to suspected Ebola cases within school settings.

The SOPs intensifying efforts to prevent local transmission follow the outbreak of the Bundibugyo strain of Ebola in eastern DR Congo, involving more than 500 suspected infections, with over 130 deaths registered. Uganda, on the other hand, has recorded one death among two individuals who travelled from the DR Congo.

The new directives, issued under the guidance of the ministry permanent secretary, Dr Diana Atwine, also introduce strict infection-prevention measures targeting religious gatherings, political events, funerals, markets and public transport systems across the country.

TIGHTEN EBOLA CONTROLS IN SCHOOLS

Under the new guidelines, all schools and institutions of higher learning must immediately establish handwashing stations, temperature screening points and isolation areas for suspected Ebola cases.

The SOPs apply to all learning institutions, which the ministry describes as high-risk environments because of close physical interaction among learners and staff.

"All schools shall ensure availability of handwashing facilities with clean running water and soap at school entrances, classrooms, dormitories, dining areas, toilets and staff rooms," the ministry directs.

Schools have also been instructed to discourage handshakes, hugging and sharing of personal items, while classrooms and dormitories must remain well-ventilated throughout the outbreak period.

The ministry further ordered school administrators to immediately isolate and report any learner, teacher or staff member presenting Ebola-like symptoms, including fever, vomiting, diarrhoea, bleeding, chest pain or unexplained weakness.

"We ask you to immediately call the Ministry of Health. Every district has got an outbreak response unit headed by the Resident District Commissioner (RDC). Please, do not handle any suspected case yourself; we have no plan to close any institution because Ebola is not like COVID. Please, report any case; do not keep them or hide for fear of closure," Atwine told *New Vision*.

Atwine said the new measures are necessary because of the scale of the regional outbreak and the risk posed by continued population movement between Uganda and eastern DR Congo. She added that Uganda's surveillance systems remain strong and capable of rapidly detecting outbreaks anywhere in the country.

The health ministry said rapid response teams, surveillance officers

EBOLA: SOPs for schools

All schools shall:

▶ Ensure availability of handwashing facilities with clean running water and soap at:

- School entrances
- Classrooms
- Dormitories
- Dining areas
- Toilets
- Staff rooms



▶ Enforce mandatory handwashing for all learners, staff, and visitors upon entry and at regular intervals.

▶ Regularly clean and disinfect:

- Classrooms
- Dormitories
- Toilets and bathrooms
- Dining halls
- School vehicles
- Frequently touched surfaces

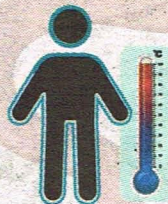
▶ Ensure proper waste management and disposal.

Discourage:

- Handshakes
- Hugging
- Sharing personal items

▶ Keep classrooms and dormitories well-ventilated by opening windows and doors where possible.

▶ Establish temperature screening points at school entrances.



▶ Restrict entry for persons with symptoms suggestive of EVD.



Diana Atwine

and laboratory units had already been deployed across high-risk border districts, stretching from Arua to Kisoro.

MASS GATHERINGS

The ministry has also issued strict guidelines for organisers of religious events, football matches, weddings, political rallies, crusades and funerals during the outbreak period.

Under the new SOPs, organisers of mass gatherings must notify health authorities before holding events and allow health inspections and risk assessments at venues.

Every gathering site must now have handwashing facilities, temperature screening points, waste management systems, isolation rooms and emergency evacuation arrangements for suspected Ebola patients.

"Any participant with a temperature above 38 degrees must be isolated for further investigation," the ministry says.

The guidelines also require organisers to provide at least one toilet stance for every 20 participants and ensure proper ventilation at event venues. Large gatherings may also be postponed or restricted if advised by the ministry, depending on the outbreak situation.

DO NOT LAY HANDS ON WORSHIPPERS

Places of worship have additionally been instructed to suspend physical greetings and close-contact prayer practices during services. The ministry advised clerics to avoid laying hands on worshippers, handshakes and physical contact during prayers.

Churches and mosques have also been directed to provide handwashing facilities at entry points, display Ebola prevention messages and isolate any worshipper who develops symptoms during services.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT AND MARKETS UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Taxi parks, buses, bodabodas, ferries and markets have also been placed under enhanced Ebola prevention measures. Transport operators must regularly disinfect vehicles, provide hand sanitisers and avoid transporting

PRISONS ON HIGH ALERT

Uganda Prisons Service (UPS) has rolled out strict Ebola prevention and containment measures across prisons nationwide.

The directives, issued by the Commissioner General of Prisons through the service spokesperson Frank Baine, place prisons under heightened surveillance. Under the new measures, all regional and district prison commanders, together with officers-in-charge of prison facilities are expected to actively participate in district Ebola preparedness and response task force meetings.

The prisons service has also ordered immediate enhanced monitoring of inmates and prison staff across all prison facilities in the country, focusing majorly on prisons located on the Uganda-DR Congo border and high-mobility urban facilities, including Kampala Extra and prisons within the central region.

UPS has also introduced mandatory Ebola symptom screening for all new inmates and visitors entering prison facilities in line with national health guidelines issued by the health ministry.

Baine says new admissions arriving from Ebola-affected or high-risk travel zones will undergo enhanced health monitoring and closer co-ordination with health authorities.

He says the measures are intended to quickly identify possible infections before they spread within the confined prison environment, where outbreaks can rapidly escalate because of overcrowding and close contact.

visibly sick passengers, while markets have been advised to install screening points and improve hygiene standards.

The ministry warns the public against touching sick persons or handling bodies suspected to have died from Ebola without trained burial teams.

Atwine urged Ugandans to remain calm but vigilant, insisting the country has successfully contained multiple Ebola outbreaks before.

"The country has experience from previous outbreaks, which we have always managed to contain and address in the shortest time possible. This time as well, we are confident that we shall overcome it," she said.

Education ministry guides Higher education state minister John C. Musingo rallied all schools to enforce the health ministry-issued SOPs.

"There's a need to be vigilant, and if you suspect anyone, please alert the Ministry of Health immediately or call us to link you to the task force," Musingo said.

Ishasha and Kyeshero border closed Relatedly, Uganda-based Kanungu district authorities have closed the Ishasha and Kyeshero border posts along the Uganda-DRC frontier.

Kanungu Resident District Commissioner and head of the district Ebola task force, Ambrose Amanyire Mwesigye, said security and health authorities have restricted movement through porous crossing points to prevent the deadly virus from entering local communities.

He said surveillance and screening operations have been intensified across border communities, with rapid response teams deployed to monitor movement and strengthen public awareness on Ebola prevention measures.

Village Health Teams, local leaders and security agencies have also been instructed to remain on high alert and immediately report any suspected Ebola symptoms.

"We are appealing to the public

to remain calm but vigilant. Anyone presenting symptoms, such as fever, vomiting, bleeding or unexplained weakness should immediately report to the nearest health facility," Mwesigye added.

He said Kanungu remains one of Uganda's most vulnerable districts because of its porous border with eastern DR Congo and the constant movement of traders, families and travellers between the two countries.

EBOLA-FREE

New Vision has also learnt that samples of three suspected Ebola patients returned negative. The suspected victims isolated at Hoima Regional Referral Hospital in Hoima city are from the districts of Kikuube, Hoima and Masindi.

According to acting Hoima district health officer Dr Lawrence Tumusiime, the blood samples were taken to Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI) in Entebbe for tests on Monday.

The suspected cases were registered in Hoima's Kiganja sub-county, Masindi's Pakanyi sub-county and Kikuube's Kyangwali sub-county.

The three were isolated over the weekend after presenting Ebola-like symptoms.

Fortunately, the results which returned on Tuesday evening were all negative. Sources indicate that two of the three patients who were seriously ill are still in isolation at the hospital after the facility was advised to pick more samples in the next 72 hours for more tests of Ebola.

Despite the negative results, health authorities say surveillance and prevention measures remain heightened across the district.

Tumusiime said health personnel have been deployed along the Uganda-DR Congo border in Hoima to conduct routine screening of travellers entering Uganda through Lake Albert water routes.

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