

Currently, there is no approved vaccine or specific treatment for infections caused by the Ebola Bundibugyo strain.

BY TONNY ABET

The Uganda Virus Research Institute (UVRI) has announced plans to test potential vaccines targeting the Ebola Bundibugyo strain, which has triggered outbreaks in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Currently, there is no approved vaccine or specific treatment for infections caused by the Ebola Bundibugyo strain, raising concerns about preparedness in case of another outbreak.

Speaking during the launch of UVRI's 90th anniversary celebrations in Kampala on Tuesday, the institute's director, Prof Pontiano Kaleebu, said discussions are underway to begin testing two candidate vaccines designed specifically for the strain.

"There are two vaccines for Bundibugyo that we are discussing for testing in phase one and phase two trials," Prof Kaleebu said.

He explained that one of the vaccines uses a similar construct to the Ebola Zaire vaccine, while the second candidate, known as ChAdOx, was developed by scientists at the University of Oxford.

"These two vaccines are being discussed for testing," he said.

Prof Kaleebu added that scientists are

UVRI to conduct trials for Ebola Bundibugyo vaccines



The Director General of Health Services at the Ministry of Health, Dr Charles Olaro (left), and the UVRI Director, Prof Pontiano Kaleebu (right), sign on a board to mark the Institute's 90th anniversary celebrations in Kampala on Tuesday. PHOTO/TONNY ABET

also exploring whether existing Ebola vaccines could provide broader protection against different strains of the virus.

"We are discussing the approach of using a prime boost with the existing Ebola Zaire vaccine and the Ebola Sudan vaccine to see how broad they can act. This will mainly be a laboratory study," he said.

However, he clarified that UVRI is not directly developing a new Ebola Bundibugyo vaccine.

"For now, we are working on vaccines

for Covid-19 and for Crimean-Congo Haemorrhagic Fever," Prof Kaleebu said.

He added that although Covid-19 cases have significantly reduced, the virus has not disappeared completely and infections continue to occur in milder forms.

Prof Kaleebu also explained the historical connection behind the naming of CCHF, saying one of the viruses linked to the disease was characterised at UVRI.

"The disease is called Crimean-Con-

go because there were two similar viruses, and one of them, the Congo virus, was characterised at UVRI," he said.

As part of its 90-year celebrations, UVRI is also highlighting its scientific contributions to global public health, including the discovery and identification of several important viruses.

Prof Kaleebu said the institute has identified at least 40 viruses and virus strains since its establishment in 1936. Some of the most notable discoveries include the West Nile virus, Zika virus and Semliki Forest virus.

BACKGROUND

UVRI was established in 1936 as the Yellow Fever Research Institute.

It later became the East African Virus Research Institute before adopting its current name in 1977 following the collapse of the East African Community.

"Some of these viruses may not appear dangerous now, but you never know. Zika virus was discovered here in 1947, but it only became a major global concern decades later during outbreaks in Latin America," Prof Kaleebu said.

He added that UVRI scientists played a key role in identifying the Ebola Bundibugyo strain during the 2007 outbreak in western Uganda.

"Although the final characterisation was done by the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention because we did not yet have all the required technology, our scientists worked closely with CDC to identify Bundibugyo as a new Ebola strain," he said.

Dr Charles Olaro, the director general of Health Services at the Ministry of Health, praised UVRI for its contribution to disease surveillance and emergency response.