

Only authorised Ebola response teams, the humanitarian operations, food and cargo transportation and security personnel will be allowed to cross the border.

BY JANE NAFULA

Uganda has temporarily closed its border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) following the escalating cases of Ebola virus disease in DRC, the Ministry of Health has announced.

Dr Diana Atwine, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Health, said whereas the total number of Ebola cases in Uganda is still at seven and the initial index case that died, the escalation of the deadly viral disease in the neighbouring DRC has warranted Uganda to close the border for about four weeks to minimise the risk of cross-border infections.

"The continued escalation in the scale of the Ebola outbreak in the DRC and the challenges that are associated with cross-border movements between DRC and Uganda has led to a high risk of the spread of Ebola into Uganda. The National Task Force that sat this morning (Wednesday May 27), which was chaired by the Vice President, Ms Jessica Alupo, agreed that Uganda is temporarily closing the border with the DRC with immediate effect," Dr Atwine, who was accompanied by some of the National Ebola Task Force members and senior officials from the Ministry of Health, told journalists during a press briefing held at Uganda Media Centre in Kampala yesterday.

She added that only authorised Ebola response teams, the humanitarian operations, food and cargo transportation and security personnel will be allowed to cross the border, but shall be subjected to strict health screening.

"We have a locator form that we are using now at the border and also at the entry points, both at airports and at the border. These locator forms will have detailed information and require that every traveller must document their

# Uganda-DRC border closed after Ebola cases increase

particulars and where they are going. Those who are coming from the DRC are tasked with isolating themselves for 21 days," she said.

She added that the schools in border districts will remain open.

However, she said they must strictly observe all the Ministry of Health standard operating procedures (SOP).

"School authorities are directed to identify all students who have come from the DRC and have entered the school, especially for boarding institutions. Students must be monitored in terms of temperature daily for 21 days because the incubation period for Ebola is 21 days. Day scholars from Congo are advised to stay home."

Dr Atwine said district officials should designate a particular health facility where students who have developed symptoms can be taken care of.

"Why are we emphasising the temperature? When students come to these schools with no symptoms, they are not infectious at that point. However, when they start developing symptoms like fever, abdominal pain, headache, general weakness, vomiting, diarrhoea, they are highly infectious. That's why we need to monitor these students for 21 days," she said.

All residence district commissioners and resident city commissioners and their deputies have also been tasked with ensuring the implementation and the enforcement of all Ebola prevention and control guidelines that have been issued by the Minister of Health and the National Task Force such as sanitising, regularly washing hands and avoiding crowded areas, among others.

In addition, all media houses have been asked to dedicate at least 30 minutes of prime-time programming daily to public education and sensitisation on Ebola prevention, detection and reporting.

"We are going to issue statutory instruments regarding this. The public is asked to remain calm, vigilant and strictly adhere to all the Ministry of



Dr Diana Atwine, the Permanent Secretary of the Health Ministry, briefs journalists at Uganda Media Centre in Kampala yesterday. PHOTO/STEPHEN OTAGE

Health guidelines. Any enquiries or suspected cases should be reported immediately to our nearest health facility or through our Ministry of Health toll-free line," Dr Atwine said.

She encouraged members of the public to report anyone who presents with symptoms that are Ebola-like, adding that the government further reaffirms its commitment to sustained collabora-

tion with the Government of DRC in the Ebola fight.

"We had a bilateral engagement on Saturday where both countries agreed to strengthen cross-border collaboration, enhance the joint surveillance mechanism and coordinate response efforts to effectively prevent and control the spread of Ebola across our shared border. Uganda remains committed to continued cooperation and information sharing to safeguard the health and safety of the people of our countries," she said.

As of May 25, the DRC had reported more than 100 confirmed cases, with 10 confirmed deaths, while more than 900 suspected cases and 220 suspected deaths have been reported.

The Bundibugyo strain of Ebola began in the Ituri Province of the DRC, but has spread into North and South Kivu provinces, as well as into Uganda.

According to the Ministry of Health, the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) is a severe, highly infectious and often fatal ailment.

The disease spreads through direct contact with blood, body fluids, secretions or contaminated materials from an infected or deceased person.

Human-to-human transmission can occur rapidly, especially in settings where there is close physical contact/interaction, poor hygiene practices, overcrowding and inadequate infection prevention and control measures.

## EBOLA-LIKE SYMPTOMS

- Sudden fever
- Weakness/fatigue
- Vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Chest pain
- Unexplained bleeding
- Yellowing of the eyes and a severe headache.