

## Letter to the Editor

## Mystery flu-like outbreak raises another alarm in Congo: The next disease X?

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A mysterious flu-like illness, potentially signaling a “Disease X” scenario, has claimed the lives of 60–150 individuals in the Panzi health zone southwestern province of Kwango, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The outbreak has primarily affected women and children aged between 15 and 18, raising significant public health concerns [1,2]. According to reports from BBC, Reuters and the Associated Press, around 300–400 people in this predominantly rural region have fallen ill due to the deadly outbreak [3]. Occurring amidst the DRC’s already strained healthcare system, the illness has spread rapidly within the two-week period from November 10 to 25, exacerbating severe shortages of medical supplies [4]. The DRC officially notified the World Health Organization (WHO) of the outbreak last week [2].

The provincial health minister described the dire situation, emphasizing the number of fatalities recorded. Local authorities have issued urgent appeals for medical resources and international assistance to combat the escalating crisis. “A team of epidemiological experts is expected in the region to take samples and identify the problem,” the minister stated. The WHO has been alerted and is actively supporting local health services with a response team on the ground to investigate the outbreak and collect samples for further analysis. The organization has also advised the public to avoid contact with deceased individuals to prevent potential transmission [3].

Local leaders have described the situation as “extremely worrying,” citing the rising number of infected individuals and the region’s limited capacity to manage such a crisis. In response, a specialized team has been deployed to the affected area to determine the nature of the disease and implement containment measures [3]. Authorities have urged the public to avoid mass gatherings and adhere to health precautions to prevent further spread. The illness manifests with symptoms such as fever, headache, cough, runny nose, difficulty breathing, and anemia, according to the infectious disease tracking blog *FluTrackers*, which has been monitoring reports of cases over the past week [2,5]. Many victims reportedly die in their homes due to a lack of accessible treatment, further straining the region’s public health infrastructure [1,4].

This outbreak comes as DRC is already battling an ongoing mpox epidemic, which has caused over 1000 deaths and infected

approximately 47,000 people nationwide, according to WHO data [3]. The simultaneous burden of these health crises underscores the urgent need for global support and robust health interventions. With the death toll continuing to rise and the number of infections increasing daily, fears of a wider epidemic are mounting among local and global health experts. The situation is particularly alarming given the rural setting of the Panzi health zone, where healthcare infrastructure is inadequate, and resources are critically limited. Authorities have issued repeated calls for national and international partners to provide urgent assistance, including medical supplies, personnel, and logistical support, to mitigate the spread of this deadly outbreak and save lives. Locals have been urged to exercise caution and avoid contact with deceased individuals, as many victims succumb to the illness at home due to a lack of accessible medical care [1].

The possibility of this illness representing a “Disease X” scenario—a novel and highly transmissible pathogen with the potential to cause a severe epidemic—has further heightened concerns. Experts caution that without immediate and coordinated intervention, this unidentified illness could evolve into a regional or even global public health threat, given the interconnectedness of modern societies and the potential for undetected spread beyond the affected region.

Global health agencies and international stakeholders must act swiftly and decisively to contain this emerging crisis. Rapid deployment of epidemiological teams, comprehensive testing, robust contact tracing, and implementation of public health measures are critical to preventing the outbreak from escalating into a full-scale epidemic. Failure to act promptly could lead to a catastrophic situation, underscoring the importance of preparedness and a globally coordinated response to such potential health threats.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Pawan Kumar:** Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing – original draft. **Shubham Kumar:** Writing – original draft. **Rachana Mehta:** Writing – review & editing. **Ranjana Sah:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

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**Declaration of competing interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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