

## **In Congo, an Ebola survivor with a motorbike helps ease fear**

21/10/2019 19:17 by admin

Kalubenge is a rare motorcycle taxi driver who is also an Ebola survivor in eastern Congo, making him a welcome collaborator for health workers who have faced deep community mistrust during the second-deadliest Ebola outbreak in history.

***Motorcycle taxi driver Germain Kalubenge transports a woman whose 5-year-old daughter had a fever and was vomiting to an Ebola transit center where potential cases are evaluated, in Beni, Congo, Thursday, Aug. 22, 2019. (AP)***

**Beni (dr Congo):** When Germain Kalubenge gets a request for a ride on his motorcycle it can be a matter of life or death. The 23-year-old is a survivor of the Ebola virus and often is the only driver his community trusts to help if someone suspects they are infected.

“I wake up every day at 5 in the morning to wait for calls from suspected Ebola cases who do not like to take an ambulance,” he said. “In the community they are afraid of ambulances. They believe that in an ambulance, doctors will give them toxic injections and they will die before arriving at the hospital.”

Kalubenge is a rare motorcycle taxi driver who is also an Ebola survivor in eastern Congo, making him a welcome collaborator for health workers who have faced deep community mistrust during the second-deadliest Ebola outbreak in history. More than 2,000 people have died since August of last year, and the World Health Organization last week said the outbreak still warrants being classified as a global emergency, even as the number of confirmed cases has slowed.

***Motorcycle taxi driver Germain Kalubenge pours chlorinated water on his motorcycle after taking a suspected case of Ebola to an Ebola transit center where potential cases are evaluated, in Beni, Congo, Thursday, Aug. 22, 2019. (AP)***

This is the first time Ebola has been confirmed in this part of Congo, and rumours quickly spread in Beni, an early epicenter of the outbreak, that the virus had been imported to kill the population. The community has been traumatized by years of deadly rebel attacks and is wary of authorities, blaming them for the insecurity that has killed nearly 2,000 people since late 2014.

Gaining people’s trust has been a constant challenge for health workers.

Imagine that you are running a fever and you see a dozen jeeps carrying doctors wearing head-to-toe protective gear, said Muhindo Soli, a young man who was arrested earlier this year for throwing stones at Ebola responders’ vehicles. “That would scare me,” he said, adding that some young people refuse to let patients be taken away.

***Motorcycle taxi driver Germain Kalubenge is photographed at an Ebola transit center where potential cases are evaluated, in Beni, Congo, Thursday, Aug. 22, 2019. (AP)***

Soli called on Ebola responders to stop working with military and police escorts, which he said only heightens tensions: "One wonders why the people who come to treat us come with soldiers?"

Dr Muhindo Muyisa, who leads the response to Ebola alerts in Beni, said they have received more than 150 alerts daily about potential cases. They have intervened more than 90% of the time, sending an ambulance or other vehicle, when people refuse to go to centers where testing is done for the virus, Muyisa said.

Kalubenge, who as a survivor is immune to Ebola, saw the community resistance and decided to help. At times he has taken about 10 people a day to the Ebola centers after surviving the virus last year.

He and his motorcycle are sprayed with chlorine each time he arrives.

One day in August, he received a call from a parent whose 5-year-old had a fever and was vomiting. His first step was to convince the mother to allow her child to go to the center for testing. The symptoms were similar to other diseases common in the area such as malaria, which can add to people's hesitation about Ebola. In the end the child was found to have malaria.

Kalubenge makes sure to tell potential patients his own Ebola story and says they will only get better if they go to a center to be checked.

Riding with him draws far less attention than an ambulance would. People like to ride a motorcycle "to avoid neighbours' curiosity," he said.

Kalubenge is the only good link between the Ebola centers and the population, said Beni resident Sammy Misonia, who met the driver during a community question-and-answer session with Ebola survivors.

"There are too many rumors that make people afraid to go," Misonia said. "With this initiative, people will always agree to go because we now see someone who has come out of the treatment center alive."

Kalubenge said he is happy to help give people hope \_ even when some riders vomit on him during the journey.

"People need to know that doctors treat well, and I was well cared for," he said. "Ebola is not the end of life. After Ebola, there is life."

- AP