

The Price of Ignorance: Ebola, the Congo, and the Cost of Looking Away

written by Melissa (Mel) Sanderson | June 18, 2026

Ebola is a particularly nasty virus, and an especially ugly way to die.

It came to the attention of the world in 1976 when researchers from the Centers for Disease Control discovered an outbreak in a village in Zaire (today the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and diagnosed the source as a hemorrhagic disease officially of the category orthoebolaviruses.

When I came to the DRC, I heard about Ebola from the Congolese. They called it “The Red Death.” Among the stories I heard—this one from a Belgian expatriate—was that of a “ghost village,” whose inhabitants were wiped out by an untreated Ebola outbreak. The last victims were reportedly drenched in blood that had seeped through their skin and from other bodily orifices. The remains of the village, the corpses, and the surrounding bush for more than a kilometre were burned, as fire was considered a reliable means of eliminating any remaining contamination.

Ebola is one of a group of related viruses carried by primates, largely in sub-Saharan Africa. Many tribes in this area eat monkeys, with the brains regarded as a special delicacy: in infected monkeys, the brain is a particularly rich source of the virus. If you think this sounds awful, keep in mind that starvation was rampant in Zaire and exacerbated during the years the country was at war.

Deeply concerned by the virulence of Ebola, which has an

untreated mortality rate of 80-90% according to the CDC, the American government decided to establish a CDC office affiliated with the US Embassy. I can tell you the Embassy staff saw very little of these scientists since they spent most of their time in the bush studying Ebola, determining its causes and treatments and spotting outbreaks in a timely fashion to contain the spread of the disease.

Sounds like an important and risky mission to me. I always admired the CDC staff who, dressed in their 'space suits' would plunge into an infected village to save lives.

There have been outbreaks of the Ebola-class viruses in other African nations, relatively recently in Sierra Leone where it was particularly difficult to contain because in the largely Muslim society, where women prepare the corpse for burial ceremonies, they naturally came into contact with infected blood. This is important. You get Ebola by touching the contaminated blood of the victim.

The current outbreak in DRC, which went undetected for weeks and consequently has spread beyond the DRC's borders into neighboring countries and even further, has caught the world's attention. Why didn't we know sooner about this scary risk? Should we blame the Congolese government, or maybe the Congolese people?

How about we blame the US instead? At the beginning of the year, when Elon Musk's so-called DOGE group was running through Washington taking a cleaver to government agencies, the CDC was an early victim of anti-vax superstition. We don't need all this scientific crap, went the mantra, it's a needless expense and a conspiracy to infect people with "stuff," so let's get rid of these programs. Thus, the CDC research and containment program in the DRC was shuttered, effectively returning not only the DRC

but the broader world connected to Africa by air and sea to the pre-1976 state of ignorant bliss.

Ebola is a genuine cause for concern, but unfortunately, in addition to being badly understood, it is also being politicized. The CDC website states: "Ebola does NOT spread the same way as respiratory viruses like the flu and COVID. You cannot get it just from being near someone." Early symptoms include fever. Simple temperature screenings, which would be appropriate for a variety of infectious diseases, would be a flag meriting further follow-up and a reasonable precaution. Instead, some African athletes arriving in the US to take part in the world's biggest sporting event, the football (soccer) world cup matches of FIFA, were summarily refused entry. Although no explanation was officially or publicly given, no doubt fear of Ebola was a factor, if not the defining reason. Likewise, some tourists and FIFA ticketholders have received similar brusque treatment.

This is bad for business, bad for the reputation of the US, bad for the competition and just plain bad all around.

Beyond FIFA, the consequences continue.

Washington claims it wants US businesses to aggressively enter the DRC to combat China's stranglehold on the massive and rich resource base of the Congo. Enabling Ebola to get a broader foothold in DRC adds one more disincentive to companies already confronting inadequate infrastructure (particularly energy and potable water), language barriers (Congo's official language is French), a complicated legal system and corruption. Even the largest Western companies have difficulty convincing employees to go to DRC: adding the heightened risk of an uncontrolled spread of Ebola will make this even harder.

Whether we find it convenient or not, there are direct

connections between issues like virulent and mortal diseases and the so-called ease of doing business. The consequences of heedless and uninformed decisions include putting the national and economic security interests of the US at risk both in countries like the Congo and, yes, right here at home.