

Congo's Health Minister Resigns Over Ebola Approach



Dr. Oly Ilunga, health minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, visiting an Ebola treatment center in March. He resigned on Monday after the government appointed a new team to coordinate the effort to contain the disease. Credit Credit John Wessels/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

GOMA, Democratic Republic of Congo — The health minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo resigned on Monday after he had been stripped of responsibility for managing the country's Ebola outbreak, potentially paving the way for the introduction of a second vaccine to contain the spreading disease.

The minister, Dr. Oly Ilunga, had overseen the nearly year-old response to what is the second-deadliest Ebola outbreak in history. It has killed more than 1,700 and been declared an international health emergency by the World Health Organization.

President Felix Tshisekedi on Saturday appointed a team led by Jean-Jacques

Muyembe, the head of Congo's biomedical research institute, to coordinate the government's response in Dr. Ilunga's place.

In his resignation letter, the minister criticized what he described as pressure by unidentified "actors" to deploy the second vaccine, manufactured by Johnson & Johnson and supported by the W.H.O.

The second vaccine has yet to be used in the Congolese outbreak because of Dr. Ilunga's objections. It is designed to complement a Merck treatment that has been given to 170,000 people and proved effective.

Dr. Ilunga has said the Johnson & Johnson vaccine has not been proved effective and that deploying a second one would confuse people in the afflicted region of eastern Congo, where health workers are struggling to overcome widespread misinformation about the Ebola as well as sporadic hostility.

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Johnson and Johnson say the vaccine has been tested on more than 6,000 volunteers and raised no particular safety concerns.

The W.H.O. and other international donors including the medical charity Doctors Without Borders have publicly supported using the second vaccine.

A W.H.O. spokesman said the organization was grateful for Dr. Ilunga's leadership and looked forward to "working closely with the new coordination team as we have with the previous one."

Last week, the W.H.O. declared the outbreak an international emergency, a rare designation aimed at galvanizing global support as Ebola threatens to gain a foothold in neighboring Rwanda and Uganda.

Only the 2013-16 epidemic in West Africa that killed more than 11,000 people has been deadlier.

Source:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/22/world/africa/ebola-congo-ilunga.html>

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