

The World Health Organisation's recent declaration of an Ebola outbreak in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo as a "public health emergency of international concern" is worrying for everyone and may be rather alarming for those planning to attend the World Congress of Bioethics in Johannesburg, South Africa, in July. It would be disingenuous to pretend that there would be no risk to travellers. However, official assessments suggest that the risk of the outbreak spreading to South Africa is low, as indicated in this report: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-05-18-sas-ebola-risk-low-say-officials-after-who-declares-international-emergency/>

Ebola is a serious, contagious disease, that spreads by means of bodily fluids. It is not transmissible through the air or from touching surfaces, making it much less transmissible than many other diseases. The heightened level of alert in the current outbreak relates to the fact that the particular strain is rare and the existing vaccine does not work on it (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/may/17/what-is-ebola-why-who-says-drc-uganda-outbreak-global-health-emergency>).

South Africa is some 3000 km away from the region where the current outbreak has occurred. The country has instituted its plan for dealing with infectious diseases, including screening of visitors arriving from affected countries; testing of symptomatic and high-risk individuals and other prevention measures. It is also ready to roll out diagnostic and contact tracing services.

The National Department of Health's preparedness plan for threats like these has worked very effectively in the past. There have been around 40 outbreaks of Ebola in Africa since 1976. Only once - in 1996 - has Ebola been detected in South Africa, and it was contained to two people. South Africa works closely with the African Centre for Disease Control, as well as the WHO in responding to epidemics. The country has much experience in diagnosing, managing and treating viral haemorrhagic fevers. It has the only high security BSL-4 laboratory in Africa, allowing for rapid testing and monitoring. South African scientists played a significant role in identifying new strains of the Corona virus during the pandemic and provided expertise to set up a diagnostic laboratory in Sierra Leone during the West African Ebola outbreak in 2014.

The congress organisers are monitoring the situation carefully and will do all we can to provide attendees with the latest information and travel or other safety advisories announced by the authorities.