



Fruit bats are the most likely reservoir for Ebola virus.

CONAKRY

Medical teams struggling to curb Ebola in West Africa have been discouraging bush meat consumption, believed to have caused the outbreak, but some rural communities dependent on the meat for protein are determined to continue their traditional hunting practices.

While meat from wild animals such as fruit bats, rodents and forest antelopes have largely disappeared from market stalls in main towns like Guéckédou (in southern Guinea and the epicentre of the disease) or the capital Conakry following campaigns to avoid contamination, it is still being eaten in remote villages despite the risks.

"Life is not easy here in the village. They [authorities and aid groups] want to ban our traditions that we have observed for generations. Animal husbandry is not widespread here because bush meat is easily available. Banning bush meat means a new way of life, which is unrealistic," said Sâa Fela Lénô, who lives in Nongoha village in Guéckédou.

The disease, which first erupted in Guinea's southern Forest Region and diagnosed in March as Ebola, is West Africa's first outbreak, and the worst known to date globally with more than 700 deaths. Infections continue to spread in Guinea and neighbouring Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Poor knowledge and superstition especially in rural communities, as well as cross-border movement, a poor public health infrastructure and other epidemiological causes have contributed to its spread.

The immediate concern is to halt human-to-human transmission.

Ebola - softly, softly on bush meat

Discouraging bush meat consumption and introducing livestock as an alternative to hunting is part of long-term solutions against risks of contracting Ebola from the wild, said Juan Lubroth, chief veterinary officer with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome.

"We recognize the importance that bush meat has to quality nutrition that you may not get from only crop-based diets. We do not say that you should stop wild meat... but can we replace the need to go to the forest and hunt wildlife with having a source of livestock and livelihood that can be safer?" Lubroth said.

"Can we have a more development agenda where we could have poultry production, sheep, goats, pigs ... and manage that so that there is no undue encroachment into the forest for hunting?"

Getting the message across

Promoting hygienic practices to avoid contracting Ebola already is a protracted behaviour-change endeavour. Urging new norms for diet is far harder. Lubroth noted: "It becomes very difficult to convey to an individual about a threat that cannot

be seen, in this particular case a virus...

"One of the major aspects is to build trust with communities or villages. The sociology, the anthropology, the communication is so important, not like the veterinary or the wildlife or medical sciences," he told IRIN, explaining that epidemiological facts have to be translated in simple ways for ordinary people to understand, by using local allegories for instance.

Yet promoters of health messages, such as Mariame Bayo in Guinea, have been threatened with death in villages where residents strongly oppose aid workers. "In Nongoha we were told that if we don't leave we would be cut into pieces and our flesh thrown into the water," she said.

"There are those who go even as far as saying that the government and the president have invented Ebola, and that it is meant to avoid holding elections," said Health Minister Colonel Rémy Lamah. The presidential election is due in 2015.

"We will die if we must, but abandoning our traditions is out of the question. It is true that we have lost many relatives. That's fate"

"It is difficult to change a society's way of life, but when it comes to saving lives I think no efforts should be spared. We didn't say that people will no longer eat meat. [Discouraging bush meat] is just an interim measure," he said.

Because Ebola has previously never broken out in West Africa, many rural communities have been perplexed and grown wary of health workers who have been accused of introducing the virus. Some believe it is witchcraft or an evil spell. Moustapha Diallo of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, however, said that fewer villages across the three West African countries remained hostile to aid groups, following public education campaigns.

"The main behaviour change needed is at funerals where a lot of cases are being contracted. That and good protective measures at health structures are the most important targets," said Stéphane Doyone, West Africa coordinator of Médecins Sans Frontières.

Virus spillover risks

Exposure to infected people as

families care for sick relatives at home, touching bodies during burials or even nosocomial (hospital-acquired) infections continue to account for the high death toll. However, rural communities still hunting for bush meat risk further spillover of the virus from infected wild animals, according to FAO.

"We will die if we must, but abandoning our traditions is out of the question. It is true that we have lost many relatives. That's fate," said Guéckédou resident Mamadi Diawara.

Communication Minister Alhousseine Makanera Kaké noted that bringing the outbreak under control is fraught with challenges. "Obstacles will remain until the outbreak is over. It goes without saying that we will not overcome this easily," he told IRIN.

It is still unclear why the Ebola virus crossed from its animal hosts this time in West Africa while communities have consumed bush meat for generations without infection. "We do not know enough about Ebola's natural cycle in the jungle. I'm sure it ticks away every year or every season, but it only makes it into the news when we have human mortality," said FAO's Lubroth.

While warning against consuming bats or handling sick or dead animals, Lubroth said an outright ban on bush meat "will likely see it go underground and that is actually worse.

So we talk more about management than prohibition."

Providing alternatives to bush meat may solve only part of the problem. In the long run, better equipped and resourced public health systems remain crucial to curbing outbreaks.

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