

# Ebola: Ugandan schools on high alert

Across the country, schools are relying on SOPs issued by the ministries of Health and that of Education

## BY MONITOR TEAM

At about 7am after the bell is rang, learners queue patiently to wash their hands at the gates before being allowed to access classrooms in some of the sampled schools across the country.

For instance, in some of the schools in Arua City like Arua Primary School, prefects and teachers have been tasked with ensuring every learner complies with the standard operating procedures (SOPs).

Ebola can spread fast from one learner to hundreds in a school setting.

As learners trickle in through the gates of schools every morning, the familiar routines of class attendance, assembly, and sports are now accompanied by another equally important ritual—the strict health screening aimed at preventing the spread of Ebola.

From the rural to urban schools, administrators, teachers and parents are once again tightening SOPs to protect learners following renewed fears of Ebola outbreaks in parts of the country like they did during the Covid-19 pandemic.

At several schools that the *Daily Monitor* visited across the country, hand-washing stations fitted with soap and chlorinated water stand prominently at entrances, while in others they are first subjected to temperature screening before they can access school premises.

The headteacher of Arua Primary School, Mr Twalib Ondoga, said on Monday that: "We have provided hand-washing facilities at many points. We have also acquired temperature guns and sanitisers. We have done a thorough sensitisation about the Ebola virus to both teachers and pupils, a reason many learners can now wash their hands regularly. We cannot take chances on Ebola," Mr Ondoga said.

He said with the school population of 2,124 pupils, serious precautionary measures against Ebola are done and everyone visiting the school is expected to comply with the safety procedures.

According to Arua City Resident City Commissioner, Rtd Maj Betty Akello Otekat, schools are crucial areas that can easily lead to rapid spread of Ebola, once a positive contact mixes with learners or teachers.

"We have told head teachers that anybody who does not follow the strict guidelines, can turn out to be difficult to contain. We have issued strict messages that have been disseminated to all schools within the city on prevention of Ebola," she said.

Across the country, schools are following the guidelines issued by the ministries of Education and Health and the district taskforce, where emphasis is on early detection, hygiene, awareness and restricted physical contact.

The morning assemblies, once characterised by handshakes, crowded gatherings and close interactions, are being reorganised. In many schools, students stand at wider intervals, while teachers repeatedly remind them about avoiding unnecessary body contact.

In Yumbe and Adjumani secondary schools, the administrators said they would temporarily use some of the unused classrooms to isolate any detected cases, and proceed to inform the health authorities through phone calls.

The Uganda National Teachers Union chairperson for Kabale Municipality, Mr Geoffrey Byamugisha, who doubles as the headteacher at Kigezi High School, said they have asked pupils to avoid handshakes and hugging.

The headteacher at Kabale Primary School in Kabale Town, Mr Nelson Byomuhangi, said it is mandatory for every pupil, staff, visitor or any other person entering their school gate to wash their hands.

In Mpigi District, the Assistant Resident District Commissioner, Mr Crescent Kivumbi, said they would not allow education institutions to ignore the guidelines issued by health authorities.

At St Balikuddembe Secondary School in Mitala Maria, Buwama Town Council, management has put in place hand-washing and screening facilities for everyone entering the gate.

Similar measures are being observed at Mpigi Mixed Secondary School in Mpigi Town Council, where no student, teacher or parent is allowed to enter the school premises without first washing their hands.

The headteacher of Mpigi Mixed Secondary School, Mr Nuhu Bekalaze, said: "We have designated a teacher whose responsibility is to ensure that all students and teachers strictly follow the Ebola prevention measures."

Mr Bekalaze added that classrooms have been arranged to allow adequate spacing between desks.

In Masaka City, the Director of Broadway Primary School, Mr Sulaiman Kakooza, said: "We had no option but to return to the SOPs to avoid any chances of the virus outbreak at our school, and everyone religiously follows this before entering the school premises all the time."

In Nakasongola District, Mr Moses Sekirugu, the headteacher at St Mary's Nakasongola Primary School, said while they have the water and some hand-washing facilities, the children need to be reminded about the need to wash their hands regularly.

While several hand-washing facilities are visible at sections of the respective school compounds for schools in Lurweero, Nakasongola and Nakaseke districts, many remain empty over a long period and fail to serve the purpose.

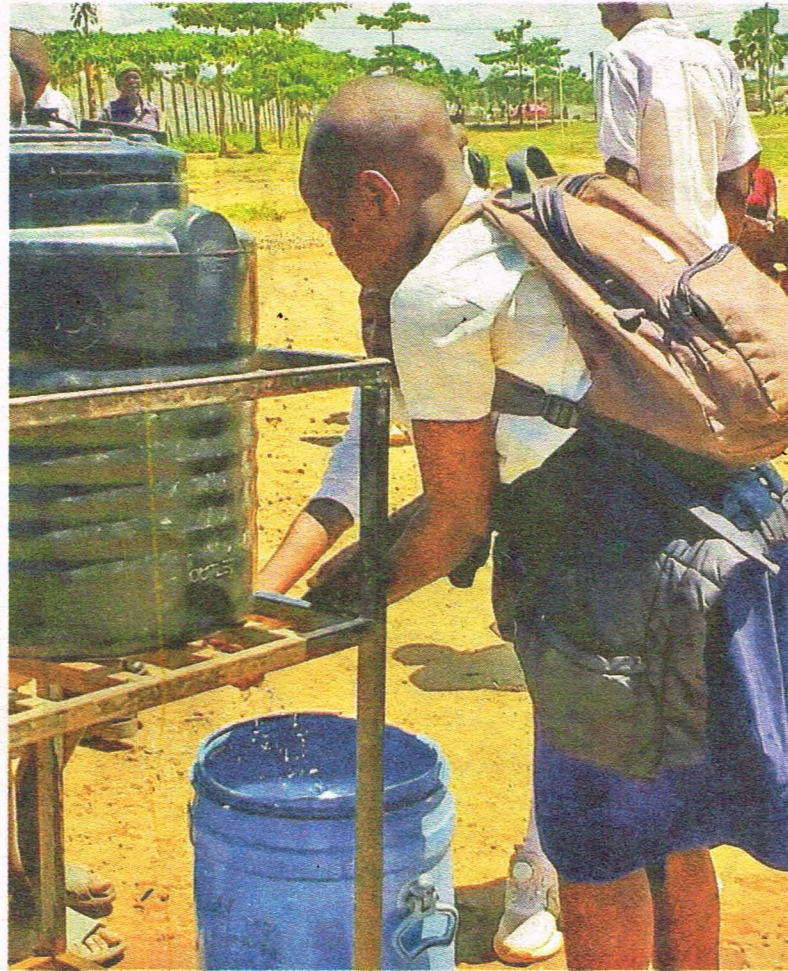
At several school gates, hand-washing facilities been placed at the gate, but are rarely used by both the staff and children accessing the school.

Mr Wilson Hope Tumusabe, the headteacher of Kihande Parent's Primary School, said teachers have also been tasked with educating learners on Ebola symptoms and preventive measures.

Ms Hellen Muganbe, the headteacher of Masindi Valley Secondary School, said parents have welcomed the measures, saying they provide confidence that schools are taking the safety of children seriously.

Some school authorities told the *Daily Monitor* on Monday that they have placed posters around the school and notice boards for children to read and follow SOPs.

In Ibanda, Mr Daniel Mutatina, the headteacher of Citizens Secondary School, said: "We are emphasising hand sanitisers as one of the requirements.



A pupil of Arua Primary School in Arua City washes her hands before accessing a classroom as a measure to curb the Ebola virus disease transmission. PHOTO/FELIX WAROM OKELLO

Ms Celia Amany, the headmistress of Kibubura Girls School, said they have restricted visitors in the school and students are not allowed to move out of school.

The ban on visitors is also at Mbarara Junior School where the headteacher, Mr Nathan Mugume, said: "We have trained our teachers and school prefects to always monitor signs and symptoms of Ebola. Visitation of learners has been suspended."

## Challenges remain

In boarding schools, where hundreds of students live closely together, administrators face an even greater challenge. Dormitory inspections have intensified, with matrons and patrons monitoring cleanliness, ventilation, and personal hygiene.

Congestion remains a challenge at the dining halls during meal-time because of the need to observe time for afternoon lessons.

## CONGOLESE PUPILS LEFT IN LIMBO

In Kisoro District, the Ebola taskforce has stopped Congolese children who have been crossing the border daily to attend lessons in Uganda's primary schools in the border communities.

The Kisoro Deputy Resident District Commissioner, Mr Dan Ndikumwami, said: "Congolese children that have been crossing the border to attend lessons in the Ugandan schools Kisoro have been stopped in a bid to control the spread of Ebola virus disease that is common in their home country."

In Yumbe District, the deputy headteacher of Kena Valley Primary School in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, Mr Ismail Saidi, said: "We have very few hand-washing facilities. The school faces a challenge of water that is frustrating our efforts. The school depends solely on a piped water system, but sometimes water doesn't flow."

School administrators in Koboko District, along the Uganda-DRC border, have appealed to the Ministry of Education and Sports for urgent support to help curb the spread of Ebola, amid concerns that many learners come from the DRC.

Most schools in the district reportedly have only one temperature gun, while many lack sanitisers, despite requirements to follow SOPs for disease prevention.

At Maaji Seed Secondary School in Adjumani District, which has an enrolment of more than 1,000 students, the headteacher, Mr Norbert Evuma, said the in-

The Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Health, Dr Diana Atwine, in a circular, underscored the importance of vigilance in education institutions, noting that early detection and rapid response are essential in containing outbreaks.

As Uganda continues strengthening surveillance against Ebola, schools remain on the frontline of prevention efforts.

Through hand-washing, screening, awareness campaigns, isolation measures and cooperation with health authorities, educators hope classrooms will remain safe spaces for learning rather than centres of transmission.



## Prevention.

"We had no option but to return to the SOPs to avoid any chances of the virus outbreak at our school, and everyone religiously follows this before entering the school premises all the time," Sulaiman Kakooza, Director of Broadway Primary School, Masaka City

stitution has established an Ebola taskforce to oversee the enforcement of preventive measures.

These include the mandatory use of face masks, regular handwashing and restricting access to visitors.

"We have directed learners to improvise their own face masks, procured adequate supplies of sanitisers and made hand-washing compulsory at all times. Most importantly, we have limited visitors' access to the school. Those who come, especially parents paying school fees, are not allowed to interact with learners," Mr Evuma said.

In Busoga Sub-region, at Jinja Senior Secondary School, the head teacher, Mr William Ongom, said hand-washing facilities have been installed at all entry points and strategic locations within the school to reduce the risk of transmission.

"We have placed hand-washing facilities at the school gates and around classrooms to minimise the chances of Ebola spreading in case of any suspected infection," Mr Ongom said.

Mr Ongom added that the school has established communication channels with health workers in Jinja City to ensure any suspected Ebola case is reported promptly for immediate response and containment.

He said both students and parents are regularly being reminded to observe the SOPs and remain vigilant to avoid unnecessary risks.

Similarly, at St Joseph Senior Secondary School-Nakanyonyi in Jinja City, the school director, Mr Moses Kisubi, said: "We have two full-time medical officers who are helping us implement and monitor adherence to the SOPs issued by the ministries [of Education and Health]," Mr Kisubi said.

Hand-washing facilities have also been installed across the compound and in offices to promote regular hand hygiene.

The school has further restricted access to outsiders, only allowing visitors with essential reasons to enter the premises as part of efforts to minimise contact with the public.

Mr Kisubi added that the school has scaled down activities that involve close physical contact and excessive sweating, particularly some co-curricular activities, to reduce the risk of disease transmission.

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