

Hantavirus fears driven by Covid trauma, says WHO

BY TONNY ABET

KAMPALA. The Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has attributed heightened public anxiety over the Hantavirus outbreak aboard the cruise ship MV Hondius to unhealed trauma from the Covid-19 pandemic.

"This disease is not Covid, and we have said it many times as WHO. And when we say this, we don't take it very lightly. Of course, the risk to the local population is low. One is because of the nature of the disease itself, but secondly, the risk is low because the Spanish government has made all the preparations to prevent any problem," Dr Tedros said.

He made these remarks on Saturday evening to residents of the populous Tenerife Island in Spain, where he has gone to check and supervise as the ship docked in Granadilla port under strict

protocols and the travellers disembarked. "The concern is legitimate, because of Covid, especially in 2020. That trauma is still in our minds, so people will have questions, people will have concerns, but that is what I tried to address in my letter to the people of Tenerife... [the current public health risk from hantavirus remains low]," Dr Tedros said.

The MV Hondius, carrying around 150 passengers and crew, has recorded eight confirmed or probable cases of the Andes strain of hantavirus, including three deaths. No symptomatic individuals are currently on board as the vessel arrived for a controlled disembarkation.

The disembarkment of the first group of MV Hondius passengers started yesterday. "WHO experts on the ground are working with the Spanish Health Ministry on the epidemiological assessment of the passengers and coordinating charter flights with the Interior Ministry. This collaboration remains essential



Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

to ensuring a safe and managed disembarkation," Dr Tedros said on X.

Information from the WHO indicates that by May 8, four patients were hospitalised - one in intensive care in Johannesburg, South Africa and two in different hospitals in the Netherlands, and one in Zurich, Switzerland.

According to WHO, Hantaviruses, first

isolated from a rodent (rat) in 1978 in South Korea, are a group of viruses carried by rodents that can cause severe disease in humans.

Several strains of Hantavirus have been infecting and killing people for centuries, especially in the Americas, Europe and Asia, with 200,000 global cases and hantavirus-like symptoms reported annually, according to Gavi.

People usually get infected through contact with infected rodents or their urine, droppings or saliva, and the infection with hantaviruses can cause a range of illnesses, including severe disease and death.

In Uganda, government scientists said it is not a concern because the virus poses a very low risk "It is not of concern to us in Uganda. It has a known mode of transmission that requires vectors and contamination of foods," Dr Daniel Kyabayinze, the Director of Public Health at the Health Ministry, told *Daily Monitor*.