

Italy election: Populist PM candidate Conte faces CV scrutiny. The law professor nominated to be Italy's next prime minister is facing allegations he embellished his CV. Giuseppe Conte, 54, says on his resume that he "perfected his legal studies" at New York University. But a spokeswoman for the institution told the *New York Times* there was no record of him having studied there. The Five Star Movement and its prospective coalition partner, the League, are awaiting approval from Italy's president to form a government.

Ebola victims run to pastors and witchdoctors for cure

Misconception. In DR Congo, as elsewhere in Africa, disease and death are often not looked on as natural phenomena.

BY AFP

KINSHASA. Health workers fighting Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo have run into an invisible but powerful hurdle -- a belief system that deems the disease to be a curse or the result of evil spirits.

Some people are refusing medical care and turn instead to preachers and prayers to chase away the threat, they say.

The pastor of an evangelical church last Wednesday died several days after he "prayed" for an Ebola victim who went to him for help, a doctor said.

"Some sick people believe that the Ebola epidemic comes from sorcery -- they refuse to be treated and prefer to pray," said Julie Lobali, a nurse on the front line against the DRC's ninth Ebola outbreak.

She is working in a hospital in Mbandaka, a port city on the Congo River in northwest DRC where the first urban case was reported last Thursday.

Since the outbreak was declared in the remote area of Bikoro on May 8, 51 cases of Ebola have been reported with 27 deaths.

One superstition that has become prevalent in the city, she says, is believing that Ebola began in Bikoro as "a curse on those who ate stolen meat" -- a wild animal hunted in the countryside.

Blandine Mboyo, who lives in Mbandaka's district of Bongondjo, told AFP "a hunter put a curse on the village because his big game was stolen."

"This curse is so powerful because it hits those who ate this meat, having heard about the theft or having seen the stolen animal," added Nicole Batoa, a local vendor.

Another resident, Guy Ingila, observed that officials have said on the radio "this disease is incurable... It's because it's about witchcraft."

For doctors and health officials these beliefs raise serious concerns, complicating efforts to contain and roll back the deadly Ebola virus.

In Geneva on Tuesday, African health officials said they were preparing to send anthropologists to the DRC to help with an Ebola vaccination campaign.

A prototype vaccine will first be given to frontline health workers and then to people who have been



Remedy. Nurses working with the World Health Organisation prepare to administer vaccines in Mbandaka, DR Congo on Monday. PHOTO BY AFP

in contact with Ebola cases.

"If we do not handle communication well, the vaccination programme may suffer," John Nken-gasong, head of Africa Centres for Disease Control (Africa CDC), told reporters in Geneva, Switzerland.

"So we are also assessing how in the next two weeks or so to deploy anthropologists to support the vaccine efforts."

'Bad spirit'

In DR Congo, as elsewhere in Africa, disease and death are often not looked on as natural phenomena.

"So many deaths is a sign of a curse and can only have been provoked by a bad spirit," said Zacharie Bababaswe, a Congolese specialist in cultural history, explaining people's perceptions of Ebola.

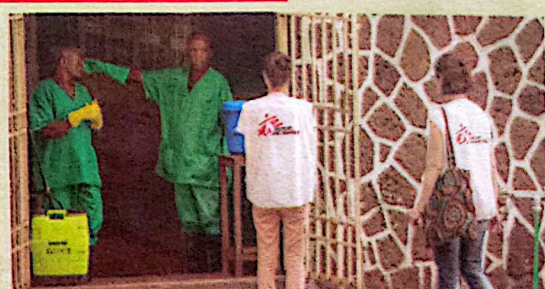
Before the expansion of evangelical churches in the country, Bababaswe says many Congolese would go see the witch doctor or village healer for treatment.

Today there is still widespread superstition -- but, since the 1980s, it has taken a different form, with some people turning for help to a church or a pastor who claims to have healing powers.

Some people infected with Ebola in Bikoro went to the churches rather than a medical centre for help, local witnesses said.

Another patient, who had been hospitalised in Mbandaka, left the

VACCINES



Treatment centre. Medics at an Ebola treatment centre in Wangata Reference Hospital in the DR Congo. PHOTO BY AFP

The death toll from Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has risen to 27.

So far, there have been 51 cases since the outbreak was declared on May 8. One of the world's most notorious diseases, Ebola is a virus-caused haemorrhagic fever that in extreme cases leads to fatal bleeding from internal organs, the mouth, eyes or ears.

The outbreak began in rural northwestern DRC in a remote location called Bikoro, about 150 kilometres away.

The health authorities on Monday

begin administering a prototype vaccine to a small number of health workers in Mbandaka, as part of the campaign to contain and roll back the disease.

The immunisation team will follow suit on Saturday in Bikoro, vaccinating more than 600 people in all for the first phase of the operation.

The outbreak is the ninth in the DRC since the disease was first identified in 1976. It was named after a Congolese river where the first cases were recorded. The last outbreak was in 2017, and was rapidly curtailed with four deaths.

medical centre to seek out a local healer, they said.

To brake the spread of Ebola, "we have to convince villagers that the

disease is not a curse," said Bavor N'Sa Mputu, an elected official from Bikoro, pointing to the key role that churches can play.