

Ebola

Emile Ouamouno was just two years old and living in the remote Guinean village of Meliandou when he began suffering from a fever, headache and bloody diarrhoea.

In December 2013, despite his family's best efforts, the young boy died - followed within days by his three-year-old sister Philomene and their pregnant mother Sai.

This was the start of an Ebola outbreak so devastating that it would kill more than 5,000 people in a year, leave hundreds of children orphaned and affect thousands more.

The village of Meliandou sits deep within the Guinean forest region, surrounded by towering reeds and oil palm cultivations - these are believed to have attracted the fruit bats carrying the virus passed onto Emile.

In a pattern that has come to characterise the spread of this deadly virus as it tears into close-knit communities, Ebola infected village health workers before spreading to nearby districts.

But the first few deaths failed to set off any alarm bells. Meliandou, located in Guinea's Gueckedou province, is isolated. It is two hours to the nearest city on a difficult road and people are accustomed to endemic diseases with early symptoms mimicking those of Ebola.

Add to that a porous land border, with many people regularly crossing into Liberia and Sierra Leone in search of markets to sell their products, and the deadly virus was able to smoulder undetected across unsuspecting communities for three months.

Etienne Ouamouno, whose wife and children are the first known victims of the outbreak, speaks to Tulip Maunder.

Early on, hospitals quickly became Ebola incubators as health workers and doctors who believed they were dealing with cholera or Lassa fever, a much less deadly haemorrhagic virus prevalent in the region, fell ill after treating patients.

Of the first 15 deaths documented in the New England Medical Journal's analysis tracing the current Ebola outbreak, four were health staff.

There is a cure for Ebola but it takes 6 months to make.

By John Donaldson 8KB