



Commentary, October 16, 2013

## EBOLA: A THREAT TO INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

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Only two viruses have ever been discussed by the UN Security Council, both terrifying blood-borne viruses that first emerged in Africa – HIV/AIDS, which first brought the Security Council together in 2000, and Ebola, the subject of an unusual resolution that was passed unanimously on 18 September.

As the West African outbreak reaches catastrophic proportions – Ebola cases are now believed to be doubling every three weeks – the Security Council in its first ever emergency meeting on a public health crisis, declared that “the ‘unprecedented extent’ of the Ebola outbreak in Africa constituted a threat to international peace and security” and urged countries to lift travel restrictions and send desperately needed personnel and supplies to West Africa.

Thousands of miles away, an unknown number of people have died at the hands of members of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS.

Although the Ebola outbreak is a global health crisis caused by a virus, and ISIS is an international security crisis caused by an insurgent group, the two

have much in common. Each poses serious threats to the safety of people not only in their own nations, but also to populations around the world. Both Ebola and ISIS were threats that were initially underestimated, even denied, by national and international political powers and bodies. Both have persisted and now require a complex, multi sectoral strategy that includes political, military, infrastructural, and humanitarian interventions. The response to these threats is challenging and expensive. It is also late: earlier intervention arguably could have saved lives in both cases. It could have prevented instability, loss of economic assets, and reverse in development gains or investment.

Finally, and most important, Ebola and ISIS are serious global challenges that mask deeper, more complex problems. They are, in essence, opportunistic infections taking advantage of weakened, vulnerable systems.

Like many crisis in those circumstances, they easily get out of control, and can become a threat to international security.



Let's focus on Ebola. Why and how can Ebola, a pandemic affecting mainly three West African countries, be a threat to international security.

It can do so in three main ways.

First, there is economics. Not only "Ebola suddenly becomes a billion-dollar fight" based on the estimates of the World Health Organisations (which are adjourned on a weekly basis by the way), it also threatens, according to the World Bank, to deal a "catastrophic" blow to the affected countries' economies and the broader region. Guinea's economic growth could be reduced by 2 percentage points in 2015, Sierra Leone's by 9 percentage points and Liberia's by 11 percentage points. The consequences, in countries that are just emerging from conflict and with weak institutions and capacities, are not only a reverse in growth and development gains, but also in employment and livelihood opportunities for young people and vulnerable groups. The flourishing of illegal – criminal – activities, not only in the concerned countries, but in the whole region may be just one of the consequences.

Second there is the fear and lack of trust factor. Understanding and responding effectively to the potential threat of Ebola, and preventing it from becoming a threat on a significantly larger regional and global scale, must factor in the need for a much-missing commodity, trust, and of an abundant one, fear. Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea are grappling with a history of violence, mistrust of government and of others, and extreme poverty. Although things were looking up before the disease struck, these factors go a long way to explaining why the health and security messages being spread are being actively ignored by the population and why, in some instances, rioting and violence erupted, as in the case of the murder of medical personnel and journalists in Guinea. The World Bank emphasises the urgency of combating "aversion behaviour" – a fear factor resulting from peoples' concerns about contagion, which is fuelling the economic impact.

Such measures as quarantining the entire West Point slum in Monrovia (also the opposition's

stronghold), and locking down an entire country for days, as happened in Sierra Leone, seem to be going in the opposite direction, and can only increase the fear and lack of trust.

Fear and lack of trust may push people to turn elsewhere than their own governments and can pave the way to chaos and violence. This is known history in the region, as well as across Africa and in other regions in the world.

Lastly, the institutional degradation factor. All sorts of opportunistic people and groups easily and quickly occupy power vacuums and ungoverned spaces. From simply immoral profiteers who gets paid by despaired people to bury their loved ones, to organized criminal gangs, and... terrorists. Again, it is not absurd to compare the threat posed by Ebola and by ISIS. Few years ago, who would have predicted the extraordinary expansion of Boko Haram in Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, or the "fall of Mali", previously a success story and a "donor darling"? Who would have imagined the decent into chaos of the whole Sahel-Sahara region, now one of the most dangerous places in the world and for the world?

To sum up, if past and recent history teaches us something, we should be concerned that what today still appears to some as a health emergency, hides much more insidious threats, which must be understood and addressed by the international community, before it's too late. The Security Council resolution is a break through in the right direction. It must be followed by a major, coordinated, and well-targeted response by the entire international community, including private sector actors, not left to the ailing affected countries, and few good willing partners.

A key final question is: can the world leaders and people manage the multiples stresses that are increasingly becoming a common feature of our interconnected lives and a threat to international security? The progress in science and technology suggests that we can. Political responses and people's commitment to play a positive role should probably be revisited and stepped up.

