Is Ebola the New Powder Keg?

West Africa may finally be on the road to recovery. But the worst of the Ebola crisis may be yet to come.

BY THOMAS LEO SCHERER | FEBRUARY 2, 2015

In the war on Ebola, the tide may finally be turning. Its incidence continues to fall, Mali is officially Ebola free, and schools in Guinea and Sierra Leone, which closed as the epidemic spread rapidly, are finally reopening. Yet at the same time, schools in Liberia have delayed their plans to reopen by another month, suggesting that West Africa may not yet be out of the woods. The longer the epidemic persists, the greater the likelihood that the worst of Ebola's symptoms be yet to come.

For months, violent civil unrest has threatened to convulse the region afflicted by the disease. In August, Liberian forces fired into a crowd protesting a government quarantine of their neighborhood, killing a 15-year-old boy. The following month, villagers in Guinea killed eight aid workers and disposed of their bodies in the village latrine. Similar grisly spasms of violence have broken out across West Africa since the start of the outbreak, driven by a mistrust of aid workers and health officials. More recently in Guinea, a mob in a village near the capital of Conakry killed two police officers accused of spreading Ebola, and three priests in Kabac were attacked after being mistaken for Ebola awareness campaigners. Such violence — by the government or by the people — is a terrifying prospect for a region haunted by memories of civil war.

The international community has taken note. On Sept. 25, President Barack Obama called Ebola a growing threat to global security. A week earlier, the U.N. Security Council convened its first ever health-related emergency meeting, where it adopted a resolution declaring the outbreak "a threat to international peace and security"; the measure garnered 134 co-sponsors, setting a new record. A month later, Dr. Margaret Chan, director general of the World Health Organization, suggested that the outbreak could lead to outright state failure, a warning the Security Council reiterated in November.

It's well known that war and disease go hand in hand. Typhus — also known as "war fever" — has killed millions in wartime, particularly during the Napoleonic Wars and both World Wars. The Spanish Flu pandemic traveled with World War I troop and supply shipments, claiming anywhere from 50 to 100 million lives.

The challenge is in determining whether these associations have any sort of causal relationship. Unfortunately, the scarce data on disease prevalence makes that tough. But researchers do know a great deal about how other destabilizing forces that often accompany or mirror the devastation of disease — economic shocks, food protests, or natural disasters — could lead to civil war. Here, there may be clues as to what sort of destabilizing effect Ebola could have.

Ebola's economic impact is catastrophic. A World Bank report published in late January describes severe drops in employment and income in West Africa, and a loss of $1.6 billion in output — over 12 percent of the combined GDP of Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. As a point of comparison, research by New York University's Oeindrila Dube and Juan F. Vargas of Universidad del Rosario on Colombia's civil war finds that violence increased in coffee-producing regions when coffee prices fell, consistent with farmers joining the ranks of the rebels. However, violence also increased in oil-producing areas when oil prices rose, as paramilitary factions fought harder to control the lucrative resource. The difference in the effects arises because coffee is a labor-intensive commodity and oil is a capital-intensive one.

As the aftershocks of Ebola decimate the economies of West Africa, food insecurity will rise. Indeed, in December, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Food Program estimated that half a million people in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone are food insecure — a number that could rise to one million by March. And research also suggests a connection between food security and conflict. As Cullen Hendrix of the University of Denver and Henk-Jan Brinkman at the U.N. Peacebuilding Support Office argue, whether a food crisis gives way to conflict depends on the type of government in place, and the nature of its response to the crisis. For instance, when faced with high food prices, democracies — as opposed to autocracies — are more likely to accept World Bank policy recommendations, such as food-for-work programs and looser import restrictions. (Food insecurity can, of course, also hinder a rebellion by depriving it of the very resources it needs to operate.)

Researchers have found a more straightforward connection between food prices and protests, which can serve as a precursor to conflict. As Hendrix and Brinkman argue, food-price protests are less common but more destabilizing in autocracies. That's because the threat of repressive force in an autocracy generally deters people from protesting, until their situations grow more dire. So while Ebola-related protests are currently more frequent in Liberia than in Guinea or Sierra Leone, a food protest would likely have a larger impact and engender a greater risk of violence in the comparatively less-democratic Guinea.

Intuitively, natural disasters would seem to lay the foundation for civil war. But surprisingly, Rune Slettebak, then of the Peace Research Institute Oslo, found in 2012 that they tend to prevent it. The exact cause for this is unknown. One hypothesis is that victims unite as a community of sufferers when facing a common threat. Another theory is that delivering a competent disaster response makes governments more popular. Natural disasters may also make it difficult for rebel groups to scrounge up sufficient resources to become formidable.

But even if natural disasters don't start wars, Claude Berrebi and Jordan Ostwald found, in research for the RAND Institute, that they can make governments — particularly poor ones — more susceptible to a different kind of threat: terrorist violence. Additional research shows that a government's failure to provide public services after a disaster can lead to collective action, like protests. If the government represses those protests violently, it could inadvertently awaken or exacerbate unrest.

Ebola will remain a health threat for months or years. This ongoing risk has made the international community wary of sending aid and humanitarian workers to West Africa. That could be a concern too: U.N. peacekeeping operations are generally effective at preventing unrest; research shows that fewer peacekeepers, in turn, may lead to more civilian deaths.

The U.N. Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was initially authorized for 5,700 peacekeepers. But in September, 115 Philippine troops left the force due to fears over Ebola. Fortunately, the effect of that loss is minor. Much more worrisome is if other countries follow suit.

Does all of this add up to looming civil war?

Taken cumulatively, the research suggests that while Ebola's impact on West Africa is unquestionably immense, war is unlikely. But it also seems to warn that internal conflicts short

of war — violent unrest and repression, for instance — might be brewing in the areas affected. Without understanding how to stave off calamity, Ebola-wracked countries remain at risk, even as the epidemic slows.

So what should be done? First, governments should monitor the specific economic effects of the disease to direct their limited resources appropriately. Second, the international community must maintain existing interventions on the ground like UNMIL, and restore its numbers. Finally, government forces must refrain from using excessive force when responding to protests.

After the August shooting of the 15-year-old boy in Liberia, the government took direct action to prevent further escalation, quickly apologized, and agreed to pay compensation to the boy's family. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf also ensured that the soldiers involved were punished accordingly. The government showed flexibility, in other words, and responded to its mistakes on the ground in a way that quelled criticism.

But it's unclear how much can be generalized from this instance. While Liberia managed to contain violence, other countries' ability to do so depends on, among other things, whether they have a professional military that accepts civilian leadership and oversight. While this seems to be true for Liberia, Guinea, with its high susceptibility to coups, may not have this option if soldiers behave badly.

While there are clear voids in the available research on the links between war and disease, Ebola, it can be argued, is not an automatic threat to peace. As the world works to alleviate the disease's social side effects, the research suggests that whether conflict and violence also emerge more widely will depend on the actions of the governments in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea. If their endeavors to maintain order and stay in power become repressive, they may unleash a national threat that, arguably, would be even greater than Ebola.

John Moore / Getty