



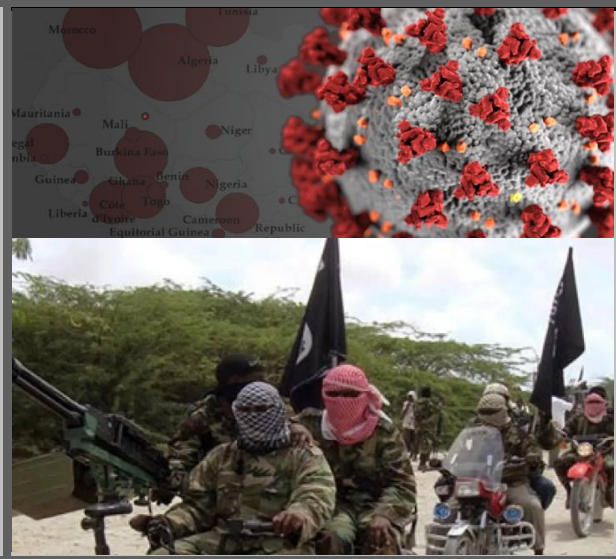
CONFLICT AND CORONAVIRUS IN WEST AFRICA

By
Fatima Raza
Research Associate
Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA), ISSI

Edited by
Najam Rafique

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The Coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the severity of conflict in the African continent where countries are now grappling with multiple challenges, simultaneously. With poor health infrastructure; Africa is already extremely vulnerable to this pandemic and conflicts in many sub-regions like West, North and Central Africa have quadrupled the threat, particularly in the Western part of the African continent where fighting among Islamist groups and national governments continues despite calls for a global ceasefire.¹ Political crises, civil wars, poverty, poor or non-existent healthcare infrastructure characterize the general atmosphere in this region.

The West African region includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Coted'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Saint Helena, Senegal, Sierra- Leone and Togo. This region has long borne the brunt of terrorist groups attacking military targets and civilians while there are other security challenges that go hand-in-hand with terrorism,² including organized crime, internally displaced portions of populations and migrants. Different factions of ethnic groups in Togo and Benin have resource and land management disputes among them while extreme poverty and illiteracy is rampant throughout the sub-region. Terror

¹ Daniel Dickinson, "COVID-19: UN chief calls for global ceasefire to focus on 'the true fight of our lives'", *UN News*, March 23, 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059972>

² Farzad R. Bonesh, "Coronavirus and West Africa", *Modern Diplomacy*, April 11, 2020. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/04/11/coronavirus-and-west-africa/>

groups in Burkina Faso and Mali have deteriorated the security situation to an extremely dangerous extent.

Coronavirus health emergency is not the only crisis faced by West African countries at the moment. There are several vulnerabilities befalling this sub-region such as US decision of withdrawal of troops from West Africa; under-resourced G5 Sahel; divided ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African) nations and compromised borders between countries easing movement of illegal substances such as weapons and drugs and restive elements across state boundaries.³

In these troubled times when the Coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc in healthcare systems across the globe; West Africa's health facilities as well as governing conditions are not conducive to handle an outbreak. It is important to juxtapose conflict prevailing in many parts of this region with the Coronavirus spread to better comprehend the true extent of the very imminent threat. Fear grips the African continent particularly West African countries, as number of infections rise rapidly while most of these countries have insufficient resources to fight this virus. As the total number of infections in West Africa touches 33,069⁴, COVID-19 cases increase with every passing day filling up capacity of countries in West Africa to test or treat those who need immediate medical attention.

In many West African countries like Burkina Faso; fighting among different groups has severely damaged the much needed healthcare infrastructure as all through 2019, hospitals in the country were raided and equipment was destroyed.⁵ Only in Burkina Faso, about 70,000 people have been displaced in the aftermath of war.⁶ While in Mali, violence by extremist groups is rampant and so is propaganda surrounding the virus spread as these groups have been known to blame foreign peacekeeping missions such as Barkhane, UN and EU operations to have brought the virus to their country.⁷ Nigeria currently contains one of the highest number of internally displaced persons in the world thus making IDP camps potential hotspots for the spread of virus. State of security is also

³ James Blake, "West Africa Is Increasingly Vulnerable to Terrorist Groups" *Foreign Policy*, April 4, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/04/west-africa-is-increasingly-vulnerable-to-terrorist-groups/>

⁴ Africa Coronavirus Tracker <https://africanarguments.org/2020/05/29/coronavirus-in-africa-tracker-how-many-cases-and-where-latest/>

⁵ News Desk, "Attacks on Health Care Monthly News Brief - February 2019". *Relief Web* <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/attacks-health-care-monthly-news-brief-february-2019>

⁶ Nick Turse, "IN WEST AFRICAN CORONAVIRUS HOT SPOT, WAR HAS LEFT 700,000 HOMELESS AND EXPOSED", *The Intercept*, March 18, 2020. <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/26/burkina-faso-africa-coronavirus/>

⁷ Mitch Lewis, "COVID-19 in Conflict-Torn Mali", *PRIO Blogs*, April 2, 2020. <https://blogs.prio.org/2020/04/covid-19-in-conflict-torn-mali/>

increasingly being compromised as Boko Haram steps up activity while in many states; people are being subjected to violence under the garb of enforcing the lockdown.⁸

Overall, it is evident from accounts of a few West African countries that the region is inadequately equipped to deal with this crisis on its own. However, all hope is not lost. For starters; the curve has remained relatively flattened in this part of the world as opposed to US and Europe for reasons still unknown. Secondly, being prone to regular outbreaks of deadly diseases; medical practitioners in Africa are more experienced than doctors in any other part of the world, despite shortage of supplies and funds. It is just what Dr. Chibuzo Okonta, President Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) West Africa said about African resilience and experience with adversity:

“Our healthcare systems are certainly short of intensive care units and beds, as well as respirators ... But we have developed resilience, skills and knowledge through our experience gained in managing emergencies and epidemics.”⁹

It is heartening to see governments in Africa putting together swift responses to the spread of the pandemic in limited resources available to them. Many West African nations are utilizing lessons learnt during previous outbreaks. For instance, Ghana and Nigeria are using an already existing tool, Surveillance, Outbreak Response Management and Analysis System (SORMAS) to document the number of cases and track the spread of virus.¹⁰ Also contrary to popular belief; most West African nations have had to do very little to spread awareness about the safety measures for Coronavirus as the populations who had been affected by Ebola take infectious disease more seriously than others.

Lockdowns and travel restrictions have been put in place by many countries like Ghana and Nigeria, while social distancing is being promoted in Ivory Coast with the government announcing that all positive COVID-19 cases will be treated free of cost. But there are challenges as well in form of lack of resources and in many areas, and the conspiracy theories about the virus are not helping the situation. Another factor seriously hampering response are the displaced populations living in makeshift camps in close proximity. Thus, for many people in this part of the world; social distancing or staying at home is a luxury that they cannot afford. Then there are countries where security officials have been reported to have used violence against unarmed civilians under pretext of enforcing curfews.

⁸ Oge Onubogu, “COVID-19 and Conflict: Nigeria: *United States Institute of Peace*, May 28, 2020. <https://www.usip.org/blog/2020/05/covid-19-and-conflict-nigeria>

⁹ News Desk, “COVID-19 in West Africa: “Let’s prepare for a long-distance run” *MSF*, May 15, 2020. <https://www.msf.org/covid-19-west-africa-preparing-long-distance-run>

¹⁰ News Desk, “West Africa: a systematic response to coronavirus” *giz*, April 17, 2020. <https://www.giz.de/en/html/84923.html>

Although countries from all over world have helped as much as they could in these times, there is still lack of a collective global response to both corona and conflict in this part of the world. US decision of global retreat could badly impact the security situation in West Africa as there are extremist groups scouting for an opportunity just like this one. Humanitarian aid being sent to these countries must continue and eventually transform into packages for economic stimulation to make up for lost businesses.

Peacekeeping missions of UN as well as other countries must also continue albeit carefully, to keep the security situation under control while there should be awareness campaigns to convince the public discard rumors being spread about the origin of the virus by terrorist outfits. It is also imperative that once this crisis is averted, a debate should ensue as an appraisal of the current international diplomacy that has failed terribly in major conflict zones all over the world and why. For a unique West African response against Coronavirus outbreak, customized policies must be adopted as the outbreak poses a challenge equal to that of prevailing hunger and poverty in the region. Restriction on movement in the West African region could cause over 81 million people to lose their jobs in the food sector alone.

Thus, a solution tailor-made to complete crucial requirements of this region in particular could make a difference in containing a massive outbreak such as imposing a partial or smart lockdown to prevent local businesses from drying up completely. With severe food shortage already in place, it would be unwise to restrict farmers from bringing their goods to the markets. Under these circumstances, West African nations must place their faith in mutual cooperation and must count on their inherent resilience to get through this global crisis.