

Editorial**Ebola – the next Pandemic****Mohsin Masud Jan**

Editor

The great 'natural' disasters in recorded history were 'pandemics', diseases that are particularly lethal, that start at one place and then spread around the world. One of the great pandemics in 'recorded' history was that of the Bubonic Plague (Black Death) that started from Central Asia and travelled westwards eventually reaching Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century.

After the destruction done by the plague, the Muslim heartland never recovered. The double whammy of the Mongol invasion followed by the plague changed the entire political and cultural landscape of the Muslim world. Perhaps, the Mongol devastation of Baghdad followed by the devastation from the plague was responsible for pushing Muslims of these areas back into religious obscurantism, almost a universal response to such natural calamities.

But then Europe was equally devastated by the plague. Even in Europe, religious extremism was the first response to the devastation wrought by the plague.

The major pandemic in the twentieth century occurred in 1918-1920. It was the 'Spanish Influenza'. Anywhere between twenty to a hundred million people died during this pandemic all over the world but many in Europe and in America.

The next 'major' politically and socially important pandemic was that of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus-Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV-AIDS) that hit the west, especially the United States in the early nineteen eighties. This started from Africa and spread to the west, but is also raising its ugly head in our part of the world. As of 2012, more than 30 million people are infected with this disease worldwide.

Unfortunately, when it comes to countries not as rich as the US, HIV-Aids remains a major problem. Once HIV-AIDS becomes established in Pakistan the consequences can be quite horrific, sort of following the course of Hepatitis C in this country.

In these days of frequent international travel there are diseases that can spread through 'contact' between people.

Ebola - a haemorrhagic fever that kills most of the people it infects -- is not highly contagious, but can spread easily in crowds where people are exposed to each other's bodily fluids.

A cough might not do it. But a sneeze in the face, contact with infected blood or sweat, or a handshake

with someone caring for an ailing, incontinent relative easily could.

Ebola is one of the most deadly and contagious pathogens known to man, and no proven cure or vaccine clinically trialed on humans exists.

Confirmed Ebola patients are fed using an intricate arrangement that ensures the uninfected are never exposed to danger. Ebola is a disease that allows little time to wallow or grieve, despite the bonds the workers form with their patients. Patients brought to the centre leave with certificates confirming their recovery, or in heavily disinfected body bags.

Kailahun - Virologists call it the "hot zone" -- nature's version of a nuclear ground zero, the centre of an onslaught by one of the most deadly biological agents ever known to humankind.

Kailahun, a poor but resourceful trading post like any other in Sierra Leone until a few short months ago, has found itself at the epicentre of the worst-ever outbreak of the feared Ebola virus.

Nigeria had trained 800 volunteers to fight epidemic like Ebola. Four people have died and six more infected by Ebola in Nigeria as part of the worst ever outbreak of the deadly virus which has killed 1145 people across West Africa since the outbreak began this year. There government has stepped up a media campaign to raise awareness of how to prevent the spread of disease.

Ebola is the latest disease to capture the imagination of the US public. The reason why the US press is seized by this disease at this time is because two US missionaries working in West Africa were infected. Hundreds have died in Africa but because two Americans were also infected, the entire US medical establishment has been mobilized to find a way to prevent people from getting infected and if infected for being adequately treated for this disease.

Until such time that Ebola can be prevented, it has the capability to spread to many different countries. The World Health Organization has already declared a worldwide emergency. Interestingly, all the reasons for which Ebola became a problem in West Africa also exist in Pakistan.

We need the world to be aware that we need a vaccine. That is the only thing that is going to stop this. There is no evidence to suggest that this is true.