How the coronavirus increases terrorism threats in the developing world

May 26 2020, by Nisha Bellinger and Kyle Kattelman

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As the coronavirus reaches developing countries in Africa and Asia, the pandemic will have effects beyond public health and economic activity. As the disease wreaks its havoc in areas poorly equipped to handle its spread, terrorism likely will increase there as well.

We are political scientists who study the developing world and political

conflict. Our recently published research identifies a potential link between the pandemic and an uptick in violence. We find that food insecurity—the lack of both financial and physical access to nutritious food, which leads to malnutrition and undernourishment in a population—makes citizens angry at their governments.

Citizens conclude that their political leaders are either unable or unwilling to ease their suffering. This anger gives terrorist groups opportunities to recruit new members by providing them a violent outlet for venting their frustrations. In many cases, terrorist organizations do what their governments can't or won't do: give people the food and money they badly need to survive.

An existing food crisis

Extreme weather, political conflict and economic shocks tend to increase food insecurity, especially among children, the elderly, the poor and people with disabilities.

In 2019, about 55 countries from regions in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East and Asia were in food crisis. The coronavirus pandemic is causing political and economic problems even in wealthy countries.

As the crisis extends to the developing world, nations will face serious problems feeding their people—and keeping the peace.

Difficult days ahead in Africa

The types of conflicts plaguing Africa before the pandemic arrived mostly consist of bands of terrorist organizations using violence to cause political or social changes in their home countries, such as Boko Haram's violent insurgency in Nigeria.

These conflicts happen in places where the government is too weak to monitor and capture the terrorists and their group leaders. Due to weak governance and lack of border restrictions between countries, the violence often spills into [neighboring](#) weak states, enveloping entire regions.

Even before the pandemic broke out, regional conflicts had already created food crises in parts of [Africa](#). The national lockdowns will help contain the coronavirus, but they also [cause other civic and economic problems](#) that can lead to violence.

For example, Nigeria has a large number of self-employed people who are now unable to earn a living due to the lockdown. As a result, they do not have [enough to eat](#), and the government has been unable to provide food to everyone in need.

This food scarcity has led to [protests](#) in Abuja and food [stampedes](#) to collect food supplies from the government in Lagos, Nigeria. People are frustrated with the government's response in dealing with the pandemic and its inability to provide essential food for all who need it.

Terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram, an organization dedicated to the creation of an Islamic state within Nigeria, are actively using the grief caused by the coronavirus to [strengthen](#) their [campaigns of violence](#). Boko Haram is known for recruiting [unemployed young adults](#) from families who live in poverty without sufficient food. The group is now [increasing its recruitment](#) of young men to carry out ambushes, kidnappings and bombings in the region.

These efforts have resulted in renewed violence across the Lake Chad region, where a recent Boko Haram attack against the [Nigerian military](#) killed 47.

In neighboring Chad, the group ambushed a large group of Chadian soldiers, killing 92. It was the [deadliest attack ever](#) on Chad's military.

Even as Nigeria is gradually lifting lockdown measures, [unemployment](#) is likely to persist, diminishing people's ability to afford basic goods such as food.

This pattern of violence is extending to other war-torn areas. [Mozambique](#) and [Mali](#), for example, are experiencing an increase in attacks from Islamist insurgents in the wake of the pandemic. It is likely that food insecurity brought on by the coronavirus pandemic is playing a role there as well.

Increasing violence in Asia

In Asia, Pakistan was experiencing a [food crisis](#) before the pandemic began, with 60% of the population facing food insecurity because of drought and [poor economic conditions](#).

Now, there are over 48,000 positive COVID-19 cases in [the country](#). Lockdown measures are making it difficult for day laborers and tradesmen to earn a living, and [hunger](#) is an even greater immediate concern.

The government's efforts to provide food to its citizens may not be able to meet the need. Particularly worrisome are the [one-third](#) of Pakistani citizens who are illiterate and face difficulty reading and applying for aid.

The worsening conditions in Pakistan brought on by the coronavirus are causing an [increase](#) in terrorism.

The Pakistani-based terrorist groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-

Mohammad are currently approaching people who have been affected by the coronavirus and [offering to provide essential services and assistance](#). In return, they [gain the loyalty of local populations](#) and access to a new pool of recruits for their efforts to set up an Islamist government in the contested territory of Kashmir.

The effort by the two terrorist groups has led to an [increase in the number of terrorist training camps](#) in the region. Indian intelligence sources also indicate that the groups, along with their ally Hizbul Mujahideen, may [send terrorists into northern India](#) in an effort to seize the contested land from the Indian government.

We are seeing similar recruitment tactics in other parts of the continent.

In [Turkey](#), Islamic State recruiters are targeting migrants from Turkmenistan who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. The Islamic State frequently recruits unemployed and disillusioned individuals to join its efforts to create an independent state dedicated to the teachings of its extremist brand of Sunni Islam.

Across the [developing world](#), the coronavirus is magnifying existing societal problems, worsening [food](#) and financial shortages that give rise to terrorist violence.

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