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WAR AND DISEASE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: THE MISSING LINK

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"War results in more disease. More people died in the First World War from typhus and lice than from bullets."

This was said by Dr Neil Cameron, director of communicable diseases control at South Africa's Department of Health in a recent interview with Reuters. With Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), countries experiencing war in Southern Africa, being hit by polio and the Marburg virus respectively, some analysts have started asking whether chemical weapons are not involved.

The outbreak of the Marburg virus in the DRC could spread to other countries in Southern Africa in the face of a huge population diaspora caused by refugees fleeing from war.

Already in Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Health is on full alert after three reported cases in one week, one of which resulted in death. The three cases were caused by a virus similar to the Marburg virus.

Medical tests carried out in South Africa have shown that the deadly viral fever, which has hit Zimbabwe is not Ebola or Marburg as widely believed. The Ministry of Health and Child Welfare's Epidemiology and Disease Centre recently said tests were still underway to establish the real cause of the disease.

Zimbabwe is now testing victims for HIV, Rift Valley fever and different types of tick-bite fevers with similar symptoms to the mystery disease. All cases reported involve people who have been to the DRC raising the suspicion that the disease may have originated from the DRC. This has raised fears that biological weapons might be in use in the DRC, threatening the spread of diseases to other countries in the region.

In the DRC, dozens of people have died from the fatal Marburg virus which like Ebola causes the sudden onset of fever, haemorrhaging, muscle pain and bleeding from the gums and skin.

The disease first struck in a remote region in rebel-held territory, killing several gold diggers who apparently caught it via contact with rats or fruit bats. Sudan and Uganda, countries sharing the their borders with the region, have warned their health officers to be on the look out.

Uganda and neighbouring Rwanda are involved in the nine-month old conflict in the DRC, where they are fighting alongside rebels trying to topple President Laurent Kabila. Angola, Chad, Namibia and Zimbabwe are supporting the government.

About 63 people have already died in the DRC because of the virus. A total of 350 people died around the town of Kikwit in former Zaire in 1995 in the most serious known epidemic of Ebola, for which there is no known cure.

A parallel could be struck with the impact of the Rhodesian war in present day Zimbabwe where the Rhodesian security forces "were given the job of polluting watering points to close guerilla camps in Mozambique" in an effort to spread the cholera bacteria.

In a lecture at the University of Zimbabwe in 1993, researcher and writer David Martin suggested that the deliberate spread of cholera could have contributed to the outbreak in Angola, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe in 1992 where over 30 000 cases were recorded with 1 400 deaths.

Quoting a former Rhodesian Officer, Martin revealed that anthrax and cholera, both banned biological warfare weapons were used by the Rhodesian authorities during the liberation struggle.

In 1978 to 1980 Zimbabwe was struck by an anthrax outbreak during which 10 738 human cases were recorded and 182 people died. In the previous 29 years only 334 cases had been recorded.

Namibia has recently confirmed the emergence of bubonic plague in the north of the country along the border with Angola, where three people have died and several more hospitalised.

"Countries' borders are no barrier against disease whatsoever. The ongoing conflicts in Angola and DRC are a major concern," Cameron told *Reuter*.

In Angola's capital, Luanda, more than 50 children have died and 700 have been paralysed in the past two months since the resumption of the 25 year old civil war between the government and the rebel Unita.

Iraq is suffering from its experiences of the Gulf War of 1991. The effects of bullets tipped with uranium to enable them to slice through tanks are taking their toll on Iraqi children who are being born with crude physical deformities.

"In Iraq, the health authorities say that at least three times more children are being born with congenital deformities than before the Gulf War. Now in Britain and the US, veterans of that same war are coming forward with reports of sick and dying children," reveals the *Mail and Guardian* of South Africa.

The paper reveals that some of the children are born without a head, with abnormally large heads, with no brain, short limbs or other types of deformities. (SARDC)