

Blow from within: AIDS threatens national security through the military

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The city of Feodosia lies nestled on Crimea's rocky eastern coast near the Azov Sea. Today it is primarily a resort town that caters to upscale tourists and businessmen during busy holiday seasons. In the 13th century, however, Feodosia was one of the fastest-growing ports in the medieval world, thanks largely to the Italian Genoese who spearheaded its development, and was called Caffa. For many traders and travelers, the city was the gateway to China or Europe, depending on the direction they were going, and where one could access the famed Silk Road.

Only a century later, however, Caffa would gain a different reputation that ensured its name was etched into the annals of history. By 1347, Caffa was known as the starting point of the Great Mortality, better known as the Black Death. The same ships that left Caffa's port laden with teas and silks for eager buyers in Rome and Paris, also brought with them *Yersinia pestis*, the bacteria that causes plague, through the fleas that lived on rodents which were stowed away in the vessels' hulls. Within five years, 33 percent of Europe's population of 75 million had perished because of the plague, while some regions faced a mortality rate of 60 percent. The Continent's political and social infrastructures were ruined; it would take Europeans many centuries to rebuild and repopulate. The Black Death, even with its short life-span, had become the world's worst human health catastrophe. That is, until now.

The world is now in the midst of another global health pandemic, this one caused by the HIV/AIDS virus. If fleas that lived on rodents caused the Black Death, the culprits of the HIV/AIDS pandemic are more complex: Social, cultural and development issues, coupled with political and economic policies, all play a role in the worryingly rapid spread of HIV/AIDS.

The numbers of people affected by HIV/AIDS have already surpassed those of the Black Death, although on a percentage basis, it is lower. Since the virus was discovered in 1981, 65 million people have acquired HIV, some 39 million are currently living with the virus and 25 million people have lost their lives to HIV/AIDS and related illnesses. Sub-Saharan Africa remains the world's worst-affected region, with around 24 million people living with HIV at the end of 2005. International health officials, however, are increasingly concerned about the so-called "next wave" countries – Russia, China, India, Nigeria and Ethiopia. In these five countries alone the number of people living with HIV is expected to reach 75 million by 2010, according to the National Intelligence Council.

John Kelly, who authored the book *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death*, writes the growth of three activities – trade, travel and more efficient communications – are all culprits in the spread of infectious disease. When trade between Asia and Europe was rapidly expanding in the 14th century, all it took was one ship carrying *Y. pestis* to arrive in a port city, and soon the people of that locale met their demise. For its part, the HIV/AIDS pandemic began with a single contact of blood between a man and a chimpanzee in the African nation of Congo, and the virus spread. (Chimpanzees have been identified as the source of the HIV virus for humans.) The pandemic now threatens the well-being of many low- and middle-income countries.

The Western media have extensively covered the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on Africa's social infrastructure – hospitals overcrowded with people in need of life saving medicines and who too often die there, children orphaned because their parents or caretakers have lost their battle to the virus. Less studied, however, is the impact HIV/AIDS has on a country's national security. Certainly, the Black Death showed a society's entire infrastructure could be wiped out and affected for many decades. Today, academics see the Black Death as history's most pertinent lesson in how the spread of infectious disease can affect a nation's security.

According to David Herlihy, author of *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*, some of the plague's effects on national security included widespread property disputes, depletion of the agricultural work force, which resulted in decades of crop and livestock deficiencies, the erosion of feudalistic control and rising labor unrest, and an overall increase in tensions between the rich and poor in Europe, which paved the way for deep political change. In Italy, for instance, the demographic impact was the elimination of adults aged 20–60 years, while 44% of the surviving population was under 19 years old. There was also a huge orphans crisis.

In 2000, the United Nations Security Council deemed HIV/AIDS a global national security threat. Since then, the direct links between national security and HIV/AIDS have been hotly debated. As the virus begins to put a strain on many communities, the link between national security and HIV/AIDS becomes a more pertinent question. Officials from international humanitarian organizations, who attended the XVI International AIDS Conference in Toronto in August, argued that unless the underlying issues that allow HIV/AIDS to flourish, such as poverty and social inequality, are adequately addressed, the pandemic will continue to dramatically impact the global community.

In the hope of learning more about the links between national security and HIV/AIDS – and providing lessons for Ukraine, which has one of fastest growing HIV rates in Eurasia -- the author embarked on a journey through Europe this spring to learn more about how HIV/AIDS affects a nation's security. The countries visited were those where many Ukrainian migrants now live and work – Kosovo and Serbia, Italy, Portugal and the United Kingdom. Ironically, some of these nations bore the brunt of the Black Death; memories of that period still eerily resonate when HIV/AIDS is discussed.

The author prepared a series of reports that will look at this sphere and where the links between national security and HIV/AIDS are most evident – and in the work of peacekeeping forces. The newspaper will soon bring them to the readers' attention.

P.S. Natalia A. Feduschak is an international fellow with the U.S.-based Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, a non-profit, private operating foundation focusing on major health care issues (www.kff.org). The International Journalism Project is a new initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (www.gatesfoundation.org) to support journalists with a strong interest in reporting on HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and related health issues.

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