

Why the brutal murder of several Ebola workers may hint at more violence to come

By Terrence
McCoy

September 19, 2014

Seven months, thousands of dead and a global crisis later, the murders occurred where it all began — in the remote forests of southeast Guinea, where superstition overwhelms education and whispers of Ebola stoke fear and sometimes violence.

The team of journalists and health workers arrived this week at the distant village of Womey to spread awareness of Ebola, the Guardian reported, where mention of lethal disease are met with denials and suspicion. Despite that, the initial meeting with villagers was promising.

“The meeting started off well,” one resident who was present at the talks told the Guardian. “The traditional chiefs welcomed the delegation with 10 kola nuts as a traditional greeting. It was afterwards that some youths came out and started stoning them. They dragged some of them away, and damaged their vehicles.”

Initially, Guinea officials claimed the aid workers and journalists had been taken captive and that distrustful residents had torn down bridges, prohibiting entry into the village. And then on Thursday night the news arrived. “The eight bodies were found in the village latrine,” government spokesman Damantang Albert Camara told Reuters. “Three of them had their throats slit.” He added in a separate interview: They were “killed in cold blood by the villagers.”

It was the most horrific act of Ebola-related violence to date in any of the affected countries. But it was far from the first display of local aggression. As the numbers of dead has surged, so has the violence: from an attack on a Guinea medical center in early April through the brandishing of knives in July to this week’s murders. The dangers under which health workers try to function appear to be heightening, as frightened locals continue to blame doctors for perpetuating the virus. And as Ebola spreads — 700 more cases were announced this week and the number of dead doubled this month — so may the acts of violence.

“We don’t want them in there at all,” Marcel Dambadounou, a Guinea village chief told the New York Times in July, referring to doctors and aid workers battling Ebola. “We don’t accept their presence at all. They are the transporters of the virus in these

communities.” He added: “We are absolutely afraid, and that’s why we are avoiding contact with everybody — the whole world.”

The increase in violence marks a new dark chapter in the fight against Ebola, which has now killed at least 2,622 people, infected at least 5,335 people and pushed three West African nations into a state of emergency. Also troubling is the impact on aid workers of threats, harassment and violence. Some doctors and nurses, reported Inter Press Service, have stopped wearing their uniforms because they’re scared they will provoke attacks on the street.

“Health staff actually get [stones thrown at them] and it can become very violent,” Fabio Friscia, a United Nations coordinator for the Ebola awareness campaign, told GlobalPost. “...It is absolutely something we could expect. The population is being attacked by an absolutely new disease no one [in Western Africa] has ever seen before.”

During other outbreaks as well, some locals, driven by a combination of fright and superstition, attacked health workers. In a 2003 Ebola flare-up in Congo, volunteers with the Red Cross were chased by locals wielding clubs and knives, according to the Toronto Star. “You come roaring in with a team dressed in white suits and masks ... you’ll have problems,” Ronald St. John, an infectious disease expert who has worked with the World Health Organization, told writer Scott Johnson.

Some say they have more confidence in tribal doctors, who prescribe remedies that do little to combat the pandemic. “This is very unusual, that we are not trusted,” Marc Poncin, emergency coordinator in Guinea for Doctors Without Borders, told the New York Times earlier in the summer. “We’re not stopping the epidemic.”

So in some villages such in Kolo Bengou, Guinea, youths equipped with slingshots and machetes guard local roads against aid workers, the Times reported. “We don’t want any visitors,” their leader said. “We don’t want any contact with anyone,” referring to Doctors Without Borders. “Wherever those people have passed, the communities have been hit by illness.”

Terrence McCoy covers poverty, inequality and social justice. He also writes about solutions to social problems.

🐦 Follow @terrence_mccoy