Gates warns conflicts stoke risk of global pandemic

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War and turmoil go hand-in-hand with disease and are the most likely agents to produce a global pandemic capable of killing millions of people, Bill Gates said on Saturday.

"War zones and other fragile state settings are the most difficult places to eliminate epidemics," Gates told the Munich Security Conference.

"They're also some of the most likely places for them to begin—as we've seen with Ebola in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and with cholera in the Congo Basin and the Horn of Africa."

"So, to fight global pandemics, we must fight poverty, too... The point is, we ignore the link between health security and international security at our peril," he said.

Gates said experts were warning that a new pandemic could kill more than 30 million people in less than a year, with a reasonable probability that such an event could occur in the next 10-15 years.

The figures appeared hard to believe, but Gates recalled that the Spanish flu outbreak of 1918 killed 50 million to 100 million people.

Even if there were no repeat, "we would be wise to consider the social and economic turmoil that might ensue if something like Ebola made its way into a lot of major urban centres," he said.

"We were lucky that the last Ebola outbreak was contained before it did."

Gates, who made his fortune with software giant Microsoft and now devotes millions of dollars to philanthropy, said new vaccines and treatment regimes would help.

At the same time, most of the control measures needed were those that governments had already put in place to cope with a terrorist biological attack, he said.

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