
SALW in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region: Challenges and Ways Forward

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The Great Lakes region¹ and the Horn of Africa² are both severely affected by the scourge of small arms and light weapons (SALW). Yet, until recently, little has been done to address the issue. Current initiatives are prompted by the growing realization that the proliferation of small arms lies at the heart of many of the problems facing the two sub-regions. The conflicts in Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (D.R.C.), Northern Uganda, Southern Sudan, and Somalia are all fuelled by these weapons, as is the increasingly violent practice of cattle rustling in border districts such as Wajir (Kenya) and Karamoja (Uganda). Small arms are also contributing to high levels of crime, violence, and insecurity in cities like Kigali, Nairobi, and Mogadishu. Porous borders and conflict dynamics mean that the security and stability of the Great Lakes and Horn sub-regions are closely intertwined; for example, the conflict in the D.R.C. fuels the illicit trafficking of weapons in and through the Horn.

Different Levels, the Same Problem: Small Arms

SALW in conflict

The proliferation and illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons does not directly cause conflicts. Rather, it is a major factor that fuels and sustains conflicts, increases their lethality, and makes reconciliation more difficult. It is estimated that small arms and light weapons have been the only weapons used

in forty-six out of the forty-nine conflicts that have occurred across the world since 1990.³ The popularity of light weapons in these wars reflects their low cost, efficiency at killing, ease of use, maintenance, and portability.

The ongoing D.R.C. conflict has been a war mainly fought with small arms. The vast numbers of light weapons already in the country after years of turmoil have been augmented by new supplies of arms brought in by brokers or by soldiers from the various foreign armies fighting in the country. The involvement of these foreign forces in the conflict—whether on the side of the government, in the case of Angola and Zimbabwe, or on the opposing side, in the case of Rwanda and Uganda—has been motivated and sustained by a variety of powerful interests. These interests include security concerns, regional ambitions, ethnic solidarity, and financial gain. Consensus for even a ceasefire is thus very delicate, and the threat of violence and non-compliance is present at all times.

The implementation of the Lusaka Peace Agreement of 1999 is consequently very difficult, and it is aggravated by the fact that the accord is between a beleaguered government, five other governments involved in the conflict, and two ever-shifting armed internal movements. To make matters worse, a plethora of extremely dangerous armed groups are part of the conflict but are not parties to the Lusaka agreement. All these groups are continually re-supplied with small arms that further fuel the conflict. Ironically, containers of guns come into a country where schools have no books and hospitals, no drugs.⁴

Small arms are perceived as the decisive tools of internal conflict. In the Somali civil war, the role of small arms was so great because almost one out of every four Somali males was armed with a weapon.⁵ If these tools of violence are not collected and destroyed once a conflict reaches a plateau or concludes, however, they tend to find their way to another country or region where internal conflict is rife or mounting. Despite this situation, weapons are often not the primary focus of attention in the reconstruction of post-conflict societies. The easy availability of weapons destabilizes regions that are affected by unrestricted trade of light weapons across borders. In Rwanda, many of the former combatants are still engaged in military training and in a reduced level of direct and indirect armed conflict. There has, regrettably, been no demobilization, redeployment, or integration of combatants into civil society; rather, the number of trained combatants appears to be on the rise.⁶

Low intensity conflict: Cattle-rustling in the Horn of Africa

Small arms and light weapons also adversely affect lower intensity conflicts, such as those between communities and neighbors. One example of the impact of small arms in inflaming communities' animosities is that of cattle rustling in the Horn of Africa.⁷ Raiding and cattle rustling have a long history in the region

and have to some extent become an aspect of traditional pastoralist culture. Nonetheless, such “traditional” conflicts have become increasingly destructive and less manageable. Small arms—including automatic and semi-automatic weapons—have become widely available, making traditional raiding more deadly. This, in turn, has made conflict management and resolution more difficult.

The pastoral livelihood has always been exposed to the vagaries of climate and harsh environmental conditions. In recent years, however, pastoralists have faced a myriad of new problems, including competition for water and pasture in the context of decreased access to land; more explicit political and economical marginalization; lack of appropriate responses to the deteriorating security situation; and the proliferation of weapons across the region.

Cattle rustling is a traditional activity among all plain pastoralists. Traditionally, the pastoralists practiced cattle rustling using spears and bows; now, the weapon of choice is the AK-47. Pastoral communities seem to be arming themselves for defensive and offensive reasons. First, they need to protect themselves and their cattle from being plundered by hostile groups. Second, they are using arms to forcefully steal stock from other pastoral communities. Guns are therefore seen as an economic investment.

Insecurity in pastoral areas has implications for poverty and competition for resources. Pastoralists are forced to flee from their communal areas and this affects their ability to maintain their livelihood. Consequently, people are forced to congregate in more secure areas, which increases the pressure on land and resources.

Increased urban insecurity

Small arms are also a rising problem in urban centers in the Horn and Great Lakes region. Complex development and social issues are associated with light weapons. The easy availability of guns is directly linked to the increase in violent crime and domestic assaults, creating a culture of violence where disputes are settled with deadly force.

A soon-to-be-published survey by the Institute for Security Studies from South Africa found that 83.7 percent of Nairobi residents felt that the number of firearms in the Kenyan capital had increased. It was also found that the incidence of hearing firearms discharged was also significant; half of the respondents indicated that they heard firearms discharged “all the time,” “often,” or “sometimes.” Both of these findings suggest that firearms are relatively frequently used and that their presence in Nairobi is increasing. When these findings are considered alongside those indicating that almost three-quarters felt that crime was increasing and that half the respondents worried about crime “all the time” or “very often,” there appears to be a strong correlation between rising crime and firearm proliferation in Nairobi. The use of firearms by the

security forces is also a cause for serious concern in Nairobi, as a recent audit of hospital records found that 90 percent of firearm fatalities had resulted from confrontation with the police.

Challenges to Confront

There are a number of key challenges that have to be addressed in order to tackle the proliferation and illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons, so a comprehensive approach is vital. In general, it could be argued that there is a general lack of awareness of the problem of small arms dynamics in the

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region. An example can be found in Kenya: in response to increasing violence against the Mukogodo Masai pastoralists by armed groups, the government of Kenya took the decision to arm home guards for the protection of the communities.

Far from being a solution to the problem, the decision led to the increase of small arms in the hands of untrained men and allegations that the home guards are actually involved in the raids.

Another fundamental problem is that national laws are either non-existent or weak and unharmonized. Take the Kenyan example above: The problem now is the legal control of home guards and of private security firms; the laws needed to fully regulate both are not in place. Another example can be found in Tanzania, where neither police nor customs officials have the power to inspect containers at Dar es Salaam port, leaving the way free for potential illegal arms trafficking into the Great Lakes region.

Moreover, there is a lack of police capacity in the region. Kenya has only 35,000 officers to maintain security, which translates into one police officer for 800 persons. This small number could not cover the border areas even if the entire force was mobilized for that purpose alone. The lack of capacity of the police to control the large numbers of weapons moving into and within Kenya has led to a serious increase in the availability of small arms in urban areas, especially Nairobi. This deficiency of capacity, combined with poor pay and corruption, has also led to inadequate controls on weapons stockpiles. Thefts and losses from police and military stocks are major sources of weapons entering the illicit market in the region. One of the reasons why the Karamajong are so heavily armed in Uganda is that when President Idi Amin was removed from power, a military post in the north of the country was abandoned and the small arms therein were stolen. Today, in many countries in the region, there are

allegations that the police rent out weapons to criminals. Enhancing controls on stockpiles is therefore vital.

Another important factor aiding illicit trafficking is the poor cross-border cooperation between police forces and other government officials. Cattle rustling, or raiding, has become a major conflict risk for the pastoralist communities in Kenya and Uganda. Raiding has implications for relations with neighboring states, as “warriors” cross national borders in search of cattle and weapons. The poor mechanisms for cross-border cooperation between the Kenyan and Ugandan governments mean that they are severely constrained in controlling the movements of armed groups and weapons. Joint action is the only effective response.

The poor demilitarization and demobilization of former combatants is yet another problem that must be addressed. The genocidal *Interahamwe* (Rwandan Hutu) militia subsequently regrouped in the refugee camps of eastern Congo (ironically, under the protection of the international community and with substantial financial and other support from the diasporas). They were able to resume the war in 1996 and again in 1998, bolstered by the recruitment of the Congolese Hutus and supporters from Tanzania, Zambia, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, and the Central African Republic.⁸ The effective disarmament and reintegration of the *Interahamwe*, and the other armed groups in D.R.C. is absolutely vital to the stability of the whole region.

There is also a general lack of trust between police forces and local communities. The action of security forces in many countries of the Horn and the Great Lakes has inflamed tensions and conflict. Force is often applied indiscriminately and thus has exacerbated already strained relationships.⁹ This lack of trust, combined with the lack of police capacity (especially in rural areas), means that increased cooperation between the police and local communities is an important priority. It should be added, however, that if people are to have the confidence to disarm, they must feel that they live in a secure environment and have faith in the ability of local forces to deliver this security. Security forces must therefore be impartial, free from corruption, and subject to civilian control. Local decision making and judicial systems need to be seen as fair and open to all in order to offer an alternative to settling disputes with weapons. As has been witnessed in countries like Mali, it is necessary to invest in measures that create a secure environment to enable governments to embark on development. Wider awareness-raising and public education programs that seek to promote a culture of peace are also essential in order to reduce the demand for weapons within communities.

Initiatives Taken: The Nairobi Declaration and its Implementation

Small arms proliferation in the Great Lakes and the Horn is a regional problem that requires regional cooperation and coordination. The main framework for action is the “Nairobi Declaration on the Problem of the Proliferation of Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons” that was agreed upon by foreign ministers from 10 countries¹⁰ in March 2000. Senior government officials then agreed on a more detailed “Co-ordinated Agenda for Action”¹¹ and “Implementation Plan”¹² that supplemented this in November of the same year. The main topics covered were strengthening and harmonizing legislation; strengthening the operational capacity of law enforcement agencies; increasing cross-border co-operation between them; weapons collection and destruction; demobilization and reintegration; improving police-community relations; and public education and awareness-raising.

The Kenyan government was designated by the governments in the sub-region to ensure the implementation of the Nairobi Declaration. The “Nairobi Secretariat” was established in the Kenyan Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate activities and to ensure a regular flow of information to all the signatory countries about developments in the sub-region. The involvement of civil society organizations was considered to be vital to help monitor and support the implementation of the Nairobi Declaration.

The challenge now is to ensure that the good intentions of the Declaration and the commitments of governments are put into practice. A number of practical initiatives are under way in this regard.

National Focal Points

Effective co-operation between and within countries to tackle the small arms challenge is reliant upon co-ordination between all government agencies that have a role to play. In the “Implementation Plan,” all parties undertook to establish a National Focal Point (NFP). NFPs will bring together all government departments and stakeholders that have a role to play in dealing with small arms. The NFP is seen as an important forum in which different departments can discuss the nature and extent of the small arms problem in the country and the roles of each agency in combating it, thus making it a crucial starting point in tackling the problem of small arms. They have an important role to play in internal coordination, as well as providing a central point for liaising with the Nairobi Secretariat and other countries at the regional level. Progress with NFP establishment has not been as rapid as hoped for in all countries but some governments have led the way. The Kenyan Government organized its first inter-agency workshop in May 2001, which led to the establishment of its NFP.

Tanzania and Uganda have since established their Focal Points, and Rwanda has announced that it, too, will do so in the near future.

Strengthening legal controls

During 2001, senior police officers drafted a regional protocol on small arms control aimed at strengthening and harmonizing national legislation in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa. The protocol draws on the commitments states have made in the UN Firearm Protocol and the UN Programme of Action but, vitally, it has been adapted to the specific needs of the region. The groundbreaking draft document was agreed upon by the legal sub-committee of the Eastern Africa Police Chiefs Committee (EAPCCO) in Kampala in June 2001, and is now awaiting government approval.

Training for trainers

Of course, laws are only effective when they are fully implemented. A major problem in the region is the lack of capacity of the police, customs, and border guards to enforce controls. A combination of long borders, lack of resources, and corruption has meant that illicit trafficking in arms has continued to thrive. Recognizing the inadequate capacity of law enforcement agencies in the sub-region, the UN organized a “training for trainers” course in Nairobi in November 2001. Senior police, customs, and military officers from across the sub-region attended the course, in which the objective was that these personnel would go back and train other officials in their own countries. The course covered a wide range of issues including: cross-border co-operation, demobilization, disarmament and reintegration, human rights and humanitarian law, legislation, stockpile management, and the role of civil society. The Interpol Sub-Regional Bureau is now working with independent experts to develop a common curriculum for training.

Stockpile management

A critical issue for governments in tackling the problem of small arms in the region is to know exactly what stocks they have in their armories and to make sure these are securely protected and controlled. Unfortunately, there has not been a great deal of progress on this issue in the region. In December 2001, however, senior government experts met in Djibouti to review the implementation of the Nairobi Declaration, and reaffirmed that enhancing stockpile management was a priority. They agreed that each state should establish one central national database of all SALW stocks owned by each state agency, private security companies, and private citizens and conduct an annual inventory of these stocks and submit an annual report on progress made in strengthening controls to the Nairobi Secretariat.

Collection and destruction of SALW

The Djibouti meeting also addressed the importance of removing illicit and surplus weapons from communities. Government officials agreed on some guidelines for these programs, such as providing incentives to encourage the surrender of weapons, including social and economic development projects in affected regions, amnesties from prosecution, and the protection of informants. They agreed that all small arms recovered should be destroyed—preferably on site—to ensure that seized weapons cannot re-enter circulation and to give communities the confidence to hand in weapons. A good example of what is possible is that in the past ten months more than 3,000 firearms and 6,000 rounds of ammunition have been recovered in the Northern Eastern Province of Kenya. This achievement has been realized because the Kenyan provincial administrations in Garissa, Wajir, and Mandera reverted to traditional structures in handling cases of conflict and crime prevention.¹³ Working closely with communities in the design and implementation of weapons collection programs is crucial.

Tanzania's pioneering experience

African governments have stated that the spread of light weapons is one of the major factors fuelling conflict and crime and undermining development. The lack of detailed information as to the nature of the problem in specific countries, however, has been a barrier to developing effective responses. Government officials agreed at the Djibouti meeting that the NFPs should mandate national mapping exercises to assess the nature and extent of the challenge, leading to the development of a National Plan.

Tanzania is the first government in the sub-region to do this. The National Plan was based on a comprehensive survey of the small arms dynamics in Tanzania. Police officers conducted 3,500 household surveys across the country and held workshops with local administration officials and community leaders in each major town to collect information on the physical nature of the small arms problem, on the attitudes and experiences of the population, and on existing resources to tackle the identified problems. The results have since been compiled into a National Action Plan to combat small arms proliferation that is now being considered by donor governments.

The Tanzanian government plans to establish local inter-agency committees across the country that will implement policy at the grass-roots level and link to the National Focal Point to ensure co-ordination from the local to the national to the sub-regional. Planned activities include the development of legislation, police training, operations to collect weapons from communities and destroy them, and a national education campaign. The initial focus will be on creating a National Policy on Firearms to provide the basis on which a

subsequent revision of legislation can be based; training the Regional Task Forces for Arms Management and Disarmament; organizing a Tanzanian National NGO conference to facilitate cooperation between civil society and officials in the implementation of the Tanzanian National Action Plan; and creating a Standing Working Procedure to govern the NFP.

The project will have a direct impact on small arms proliferation on the ground in Tanzania by strengthening the capacity of the government and of civil society to work effectively together to address the problem. This will be done by encouraging a partnership approach between governments, donors, international bodies, and civil society groups in Tanzania to combat small arms proliferation. This will help ensure the design and delivery of coherent, complementary policies and interventions in order to defuse tensions, reduce violence, and tackle the factors that underlie armed conflict and drive demand for small arms. It will, therefore, help reduce the number of people whose lives are affected by violent conflict and it will contribute to the reduction in potential sources of future conflict. The Tanzanian experience provides an important model for progress in other countries.


Further Progress Needed

Much progress has been made in the last several years to strengthen controls on small arms and light weapons in the Great Lakes region and Horn of Africa and to implement the Nairobi Declaration. The challenge for governments and NGOs now is to ensure that this initial momentum is maintained. The initial attempts to improve cross-border cooperation and enhance law enforcement capacity must be built upon; the legal protocol on small arms control must be signed, ratified, and implemented; and further initiatives are needed to improve weapons collection and stockpile management, ensure the effective demobilization and reintegration of former combatants, raise awareness in communities of the dangers of small arms, and reduce the demand for weapons. The establishment of NFPs and the development of National Plans for implementation in each country are important first steps.

These initiatives will all require more political will from the governments of the region. Governments must also reassess their own practices. There are strong allegations that some are still illicitly supplying arms to rebel groups in neighboring countries and that the arming of local populations is still common. As long as these practices continue, they will undermine any attempts to resolve the small arms problem in the region.

Strong support from the international community and donors will also be vital to success. Historically, part of the problem has been the general reluctance on the part of many donor governments to use development assistance

to address “security-type” issues, such as training armed forces and law enforcement personnel to respect human rights and humanitarian law; removing light weapons from circulation; and demobilizing soldiers and reintegrating them into society. This view is slowly being eroded with the recognition that security is a pre-requisite for development. Many governments are now ready to provide support, but this engagement must be sustained and is reliant on the identification of practical projects to support and improve partnership and cooperation.

The challenges in the region to tackling the proliferation of small arms and light weapons are undoubtedly great. But the potential rewards in terms of economic and social development, reduced crime and increased security are significant. 

Notes

1. I.e. Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda.
2. I.e. Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda.
3. See Michael Klare in “The Kalashnikov Age,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Jan/Feb 1999.
4. Oxfam, *Under fire: the human cost of small arms in north-east Democratic Republic of the Congo*, January 2001.
5. M. Nur Galal, “The Case of Somalia,” *Small Arms Control*, Ashgate (ed.) and UNIDIR, 1999.
6. M. Alam, “Rwanda and Burundi: a Tragic Case Study of Small Arms,” *Small Arms Control*, op. cit.
7. See K. Mkutu, *Pastoralism and conflict in the Horn of Africa* report, Africa Peace Forum/Saferworld/University of Bradford, December 2001.
8. International Crisis Group (ICG), *Scramble for the Congo: Anatomy of an Ugly War*, Report 26, ICG, Brussels, 20 December 2000: 13.
9. K. Mkutu, *Pastoralism and conflict in the Horn of Africa*, op. cit.
10. Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.
11. *Co-ordinated Agenda for Action on the problem of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa*, November 2000.
12. *Implementation Plan of the Co-ordinated Agenda for Action on the problem of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa*, November 2000.
13. J. Okoko, *Eastern Africa Report*, Eastern Africa SRIC/Saferworld Project, *to be published*.