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# THE LOSS OF ARMS AND AMMUNITION IN PEACE OPERATIONS: MAPPING AND ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGE

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Soldiers belonging to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). © Photo/Tobin Jones

In January 2016, al-Shabaab militants attacked an African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forward operating base in El Adde, Somalia. They held the base for several days before the Kenya Defence Forces managed to reclaim it. Media reporting has understandably focused on the loss of life among the Kenyan peacekeepers—[widely reported](#) to be upwards of 100 men and women. The loss of materiel has received considerably less attention, but is of great importance. Al-Shabaab potentially put AMISOM's personnel and local communities in even greater peril by seizing their weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and communications equipment.

The El Adde attack resulted in one of the largest recorded single incidents of diversion of materiel from peacekeepers, but was far from an isolated incident. As the Small Arms Survey has documented, the loss of equipment during peace operations is routine and widespread. In fact, thousands of small arms and light weapons, and millions of rounds of ammunition have entered the black market from more than a dozen missions undertaken by the United Nations (UN) and several regional organizations.

Logistical challenges to security management are not specific to UN missions but pose challenges for all organizations that engage in peace operations because all peacekeepers who deploy with military

hardware face the risk of losses. Small Arms Survey research suggests a number of ways that these losses can be resisted or better managed, including through improved record-keeping, tailoring procedures to the specific operational environment, and respecting the operational limitations of inspection regimes.

### **The scope of the problem**

In an [initial study](#) published in 2015 on peace operations in Sudan and South Sudan, the Small Arms Survey estimated that at least 500 small arms and 750,000 rounds of ammunition had been lost from these missions over a ten-year period. Since the publication of this study, the scope of the Survey's research has expanded to examine losses in other missions and countries. A [more recent study](#) from the Making Peace Operations More Effective (MPOME) project found that the large losses of arms and materiel are not outliers or exceptions, and such losses are likely significantly undercounted due to poor reporting practices and national sensitivities.

Losses of materiel are not limited to UN-led missions or even to military deployments; they occur in operations led by a wide range of regional and international organizations, including police and civilian missions, and even in so-called “unarmed” deployments (in which armed guards provide protection for VIPs).

There is no clear relationship between the number of casualties and the scope of equipment loss, nor are losses limited to direct, large-scale attacks on peacekeepers. They can occur during the course of everyday activities and range from the loss of a single firearm to the theft of thousands of rounds of ammunition. They also result from corruption and poor performance by peacekeepers. While corruption is unlikely to be the leading cause of materiel loss, MPOME researchers have identified examples of losses due to corruption, including a “[guns for gold](#)” racket that peacekeepers serving in the Democratic Republic of the Congo conducted, first discovered by [Human Rights Watch](#). This diversion scheme prompted the UN to include specific references to combatting corruption in its policies.

The UN and—to some extent—other institutions that conduct peacekeeping have adopted a number of physical security and stockpile management (PSSM) procedures. However, the rigor and scope of these procedures vary significantly from mission to mission, and sometimes even between contingents serving in the same mission. If all peacekeepers adopted robust PSSM procedures, this would significantly reduce incidents of theft, loss, and diversion of weapons and other materiel.

The losses noted here are merely indicative of the problem and are far from comprehensive. Official reports and media stories provide only a partial accounting of losses, many of which are not reported

for a variety of reasons. Some losses are intentionally omitted from official reports to avoid embarrassment, while others are considered too minor to mention. Some governments and international institutions withhold information on losses of materiel for reasons of operational security. Consequently, the quantity of lost arms and other materiel is likely to be much higher than currently estimated. To close gaps in available information, MPOME researchers collect additional data on losses of materiel and corroborate existing information by engaging practitioners and knowledgeable insiders.

### **Where and how losses occur**

Loss of materiel occurs in many circumstances, from direct attacks on peacekeeper bases to the repatriation or resupply of forces, and occasionally by deliberate diversion. While it is not yet possible to assess which circumstances make losses more likely, transit operations present attackers with potentially large gains. Indeed, attacks on resupply convoys, although infrequent due to the difficulty of correctly identifying and intercepting shipments, have resulted in the loss of large quantities of equipment.

The largest loss that the Survey has documented occurred in April 2008, when a supply train for the AU/UN Hybrid Operation in Darfur was attacked and 12 tons of ammunition was looted. In another major incident, an armed shipment delivering supplies to the UN Mission in South Sudan in October 2015 was attacked en route. The peacekeepers accompanying the shipment were captured and held hostage for several days, and 55,000 liters of fuel were taken. Losses on this scale may be infrequent, but illustrate the potential for insurgents to acquire significant quantities of materiel from peacekeepers without a full-scale assault on heavily defended bases.

Not only UN or AU forces suffer losses. Many civilian organizations engaging in peace operations require armed guards when operating in dangerous environments, and losses occur from these actors as well. In 2015, a shipment of arms delivered to guard units assigned to protect the (unarmed) members of the EU Border Assistance Mission to Libya was stolen from an airport in Tripoli.

Attacks on fixed sites have also resulted in losses of materiel during peace operations. The quantity and type of weapons lost during these attacks depend, in part, on the type of site, the operational tempo of the units deployed at the site, and the environment. Fixed sites are often more secure than forward operating bases and other small, temporary sites, especially those located in high threat environments. Furthermore, units deployed in these environments are often more heavily armed than other units. Successful attacks on sites where these units are deployed are therefore likely to result in the loss of more materiel and more types of weapons. Peacekeepers are also attacked while on patrol. Data

compiled by the MPOME project in the Survey's Peace Operations Data Set (see box) indicates that patrols are targeted much more frequently than fixed sites. While losses of materiel resulting from attacks on patrols are typically smaller, in aggregate they add up to significant losses.

### **The UN model—and its limits**

The UN's *Contingent-Owned Equipment Manual* and *Movement Control Manual* provide a framework for the development of rigorous controls on arms and ammunition at the mission level. For example, the UN requires missions to conduct various inventory controls and institute inspection regimes. Major equipment must be inspected at regular intervals and assessed for serviceability or obsolescence. Reimbursement requirements encourage participating countries to report major losses of equipment to UN headquarters and ensure that inspections are completed in a timely manner.

Existing evidence suggests that many missions are implementing these policies and practices fairly well. In the last few years the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services conducted [audits](#) on the equipment management of twelve peacekeeping missions. The auditors assessed that inspection and reporting regimes across all missions were nearly all properly instituted—even in the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, despite the size of the mission area and the level of insecurity the mission operates in. Occasionally, they found inconsistencies in inspection and stockpile security regimes. For example, some baggage and passenger screeners were not trained in the handling of dangerous goods. None of the audits examined the implementation of PSSM beyond practices that the contingent-owned equipment guidelines mandated.

The responsibility for developing and implementing PSSM practices is largely delegated to the missions. Consequently, PSSM for contingent-owned equipment storage facilities is not standardized or uniform from mission to mission and even between contingents in the same mission.

In some cases, contingents have lacked dedicated storage facilities for weapons and other materiel. The peacekeepers serving in these missions either kept their personal weapons with them at all times or stored them in vehicles. These practices appear to be rare, but underscore the disparities in PSSM, especially when compared to missions with purpose-built armories. In other cases, existing structures are converted into storage facilities for arms and ammunition by reinforcing walls with metal and concrete, installing armored doors, and covering windows with protective grates.

Several factors account for the differences in PSSM practices. The type and availability of storage structures and other resources affect these practices, as does the threat environment in which individual missions operate. The temporary nature of most peace operations is another important factor. It makes

little sense to construct a permanent, purpose-built arms depot for contingents serving in a temporary mission. That said, the standardization of certain PSSM requirements across missions would address many of the existing shortcomings in stockpile security that our research has identified.

Other practices are not covered by any specific policy and are conducted with even greater variance. An example is the institutional oversight of arms that peacekeepers recover during the course of their routine duties (not as part of official disarmament programs). Recovered equipment is handled inconsistently and without transparency across missions. Individual missions may or may not conduct inventories of seized arms. Similarly, some missions destroy seized arms, while others transfer them to local military units or law enforcement agencies. For example, AMISOM routinely transferred arms to the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia.

The inconsistent or incomplete transfer of records on arms and other materiel during the transitioning or “re-hatting” of troops from one mission area to another or between organizations is another challenge. When records of weapons and other materiel that one institution generates are not transferred to its successor, systematically tracking and accounting for that materiel becomes far more difficult.

As noted above, UN policies and practices for managing contingent-owned equipment provide a good framework for the development of a comprehensive PSSM policy, but the effective implementation of these policies varies among peacekeepers. The full extent of these differences is not clear. Access to more documentation, including the standard operating procedures for the storage and management of weapons that individual missions developed, would help to address this data gap. An analysis of the various procedures would also facilitate the development of best practices in PSSM, which would help to harmonize the practices within and between peacekeeping missions.

### **Bridging the divide**

Sometimes losses are inevitable. Peacekeepers operate in dangerous environments, and belligerents are occasionally able to overwhelm and forcibly disarm even the best trained and most professional soldiers. But some losses are avoidable and not simply “the cost of doing business.” While in UN reports, incidents of loss are often recorded simply as “ambushes,” some of these cases could have been prevented or mitigated through stricter control measures, stricter enforcement of existing policies, or better training and preparation. More information is needed to identify and disaggregate these types of loss so that risk factors can be identified and appropriate mechanisms put in place to mitigate them.

One way to address this gap in information is to provide greater public access to mission documents, such as mission-specific standard operating procedures. Access to these documents would facilitate the identification of common flaws in security policy and the harmonization of existing efforts to mitigate losses. Increasing transparency would also reveal how materiel is lost through corruption or poor practice.

Another strategy is to tailor PSSM practices to a particular mission's operating environment. For example, some missions operate in more volatile environments and require greater mobility. Forcing them to reinforce buildings only to abandon them as they relocate could invite insurgents to claim the reinforced structures for their own use. Similarly, there are circumstances in which a requirement to keep personal weapons secured when not in use might prevent peacekeepers from retrieving them quickly enough to defend themselves in the event of an attack.

Additionally, inspection regimes must also reflect operational limitations. Conducting inventories of all personal weapons and major equipment is onerous, even without considering variance in storage facilities, and many missions understandably opt for less rigorous inspections of personal equipment. The UN Mission in Liberia stands out as one mission that called for inspection of 100 per cent of its major and personal equipment by serial number. It is unclear how many other peace operations have similar requirements. Personal equipment is a grey area in particular, because its control measures are not as extensive as those for major contingent-owned equipment. But poor or inaccurate record-keeping can inhibit the tracing of missing materiel.

There is still much to be done to understand and address the loss of arms and other materiel during peace operations. Identifying the scope of equipment loss and the risk factors that predicate that loss will help peacekeepers better protect themselves and the civilian communities they are mandated to defend—and might prevent peacekeepers from being attacked by their own arms in the future. All those who want peace operations to be more effective undoubtedly share this objective.

## **THE MPOME PROJECT**

[THE MAKING PEACE OPERATIONS MORE EFFECTIVE \(MPOME\) PROJECT](#) IS A MULTI-YEAR INITIATIVE OF THE SMALL ARMS SURVEY TO IMPROVE CURRENT PRACTICES CONCERNING THE MANAGEMENT OF LETHAL MATERIEL IN PEACE OPERATIONS. ITS INITIAL PHASE (DECEMBER 2016–MARCH 2019) HAS FOUR COMPONENTS: (A) CONVENING REGIONAL

WORKSHOPS WITH PEACE OPERATIONS PRACTITIONERS; (B) WORKING WITH REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO IMPROVE ADMINISTRATIVE OVERSIGHT OF CONTINGENT-OWNED EQUIPMENT IN PEACE OPERATIONS; (C) ENGAGING COUNTRIES THAT CONTRIBUTE TROOPS AND POLICE DIRECTLY TO IDENTIFY AND SHARE LESSONS LEARNED, AND TO INTEGRATE AND DEVELOP GOOD PRACTICES; AND (D) SHARING INFORMATION WITH POLICY-MAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS TO HELP INFORM DEBATES AND ENHANCE THE AGENDA.

AS PART OF THIS WORK, THE SMALL ARMS SURVEY IS PARTNERING WITH THE AFRICAN UNION (AU) TO DEVELOP POLICIES AND GUIDELINES ON RECOVERED WEAPONS AND CONTINGENT-OWNED EQUIPMENT FOR THE PEACE OPERATIONS THE AU MANDATES OR SUPPORTS. THE SURVEY IS ALSO ASSISTING THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES (ECOWAS) TO DEVELOP PROCEDURES AND PRACTICES THAT WILL ALLOW ITS MEMBER STATES TO COMPLY WITH THE ARTICLES OF THE 2006 ECOWAS CONVENTION ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS THAT FOCUS ON THE MANAGEMENT OF WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION IN PEACE OPERATIONS.

THE MPOME PROJECT IS ALSO EXPANDING THE EMPIRICAL BASIS FOR RESEARCH IN THIS AREA WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PEACE OPERATIONS DATA SET (PODS), THE ONLY GLOBAL DATABASE ON INCIDENTS OF LOST AND DIVERTED CONTINGENT-OWNED EQUIPMENT AND RECOVERED WEAPONS IN PEACE OPERATIONS WORLDWIDE, BASED ON OPEN-SOURCE INFORMATION AND KEY-INFORMANT CONSULTATIONS. THIS DATA HAS FORMED THE BASIS OF MPOME RESEARCH OUTPUTS TO DATE AND WILL CONTINUE TO EXPAND.