

Challenges in addressing the loss of weapons in peacekeeping operations: lessons from Somalia

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Considerable effort has been invested in exploring the loss of weapons by peacekeepers in peacekeeping operations, particularly in Africa, given the negative impact on these operations' effectiveness and capacity in the many conflict situations on the continent. The Small Arms Survey is currently leading the focus on this important area. The Survey defines such losses as any diversion of weapons from nation states' control.

The purpose of this paper is to share knowledge in this area by addressing some of the challenges based on first-hand field experience gained in Somalia. It is important to mention from the outset that procedures on arms and ammunition handling (that is, arms control) form part and parcel of the basic training of soldiers in any military worth talking about.

Nevertheless, I am also aware that the development or evolution of some of the militaries that take part in peacekeeping operations falls short of these standards due to a lack of time and resources in a number of TCCs. Such scenarios make it possible for peacekeepers' weapons to fall into the wrong hands during operations.

I took command of AMISOM's military component in mid-2011 at the height of the combat activity inside Mogadishu city, and later handed over to Lt. Gen. Andrew Gutti in May 2012.

In order to discuss this topic, the nature of contemporary armed conflicts in Africa and, indeed, peace support operations must be analysed using different lenses to arrive at the correct recommendations, with a view to finding lasting solutions. Armament, resource allocation, and the building of local security forces, among other issues, must all be taken into consideration in order to determine the pre-mission training needs of troops.

In this paper I intend to use my experience together with the voices of others who have served before me and those who serve after me in similar circumstances. I do so in the hope that an idea might be borrowed from the paper that will enable and improve similar future missions, especially those on the African continent. I take cognizance of the fact that a number of people have already shared their views on this topic and will continue to do so. However, I assert that carrying out successful peace operations on the African continent—and, indeed, preventing one's own weaponry from falling into the wrong hands—should be part of a set of related systems that currently the UN's *modus operandi* does not adequately provide for.

In this presentation I borrow from David Richards' and Greg Mills' book entitled *Victory among People: Lessons from Countering Insurgency and Stabilising Fragile States*, in which they point out three core things that mission strategies must address:

- intelligence;
- resources; and
- people.

These three aspects form what is known as the 'iron triangle'.

Although the subject matter of this paper is 'challenges in addressing the loss of weapons in peacekeeping operations', the aim of discussing my experience in Somalia is also to demonstrate how the largest source of weapons losses, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, can be local government forces. Yet some of the mandates that the UN and continental organizations such as the AU provide are categorical on the need to work alongside these security forces.

Background: Somalia's independence and the evolution of conflict

The reason for mentioning this is to allow the reader to see the roots of the current chaos that Somalia finds itself in. This has led to weaponry landing in the hands of Somali criminals and other inhabitants of the Eastern Africa region.

The Federal Republic of Somalia became a nation state at independence in 1960. This was after the unification of the northern British territory of Somaliland and Italian Somaliland. The second president of the Independent Federal Republic of Somalia, Abdirashid Ali Shermarke, was assassinated in 1969 and a military coup followed thereafter, elevating Major General Mohamed Siad Barre to the presidency.

The haphazard killings of civilians, torture, and the burning of villages marred Siad Barre's 22-year rule (1969–91). It has been argued that the main causes underpinning the implosion of Siad Barre's government were twofold: Somalia's 1977 invasion of Ethiopia and the ensuing civil wars, especially the one in Somaliland; and his alliances with and oscillation between the Eastern and Western blocs during the cold war.

Various scholars have rightly argued that had it not been for these two factors, Siad Barre's exit and the chaos that subsequently ensued would not have occurred as early as 1991. It is also worth keeping in mind that the calamity that ensued not only engulfed Somalia, but the entire region.

It is estimated that Somalia's chronic instability remains the single biggest contributing factor underpinning the unauthorized loss of arms and ammunition from

AMISOM. The neighbouring countries of Sudan, Ethiopia, and Uganda have also all had their share of instability due to unrest and civil wars.

This brief recent history of modern Somalia was intended to show when exactly the country started to slide into conflict and how this has negatively impacted security in the Horn and East Africa regions. It further highlights that bad governance is an important factor in causing armed conflicts. The following section will provide a detailed account of how the Somali conflict evolved, resulting in illegal arms and ammunition falling into the wrong hands.

The African Union Mission in Somalia

As has been widely documented, the cold war period made it possible for African regimes, such as that of Siad Barre, to acquire as much weaponry as they wanted. Secrecy complicated matters during this period, since there was no international system to track such weaponry. Lack of international coordination during this period enabled rogue regimes in Somalia and other sub-Saharan African states unlimited access to weaponry that in turn entrenched civil wars and caused millions of deaths, starvation, population displacement, large-scale rape of women, and other forms of human suffering.

AMISOM was deployed to Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, in March 2007, following several attempts by the international community to end the suffering of Somalis since the implosion of the state in 1991. UNOSOM I (April–December 1992), UNOSOM II (March 1993–March 1995), and Operation Restore Hope (December 1992–March 1993) all preceded the mission.

AMISOM is the most costly, deadly, and longest-running operation in Somalia. It began primarily as an AU initiative, but received ex-post-facto endorsement from the UN Security Council in UNSC Resolution 1744 (2007). It is also important to note that six out of 54 AU member states have so far contributed troops to the mission. These are: Uganda (2007), Burundi (2007), Djibouti (2011), Kenya (2012), Sierra Leone (2013), and Ethiopia (2014). There are many reasons why only six states have chosen to join AMISOM. However, the most common justification was that events in Somalia posed a direct security risk to the majority of these TCCs, as well as the commitment to African solidarity.

UNSC Resolution 1725 (2006) mandated AMISOM forces to monitor progress in the dialogue between the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) institutions and the Somalia Council of Islamic Courts (SCIC), while ensuring the safe passage of those involved. They were also mandated to maintain security in Baidoa, protect the TFG's members and infrastructure, and train the TFG's security forces, thereby helping to re-establish the national security forces of Somalia.

The force was not explicitly mandated to engage in offensive actions against the Union of Islamic Courts. Furthermore, although it was part of AMISOM's mandate to train and re-establish the Somali security forces, no robust arrangements to achieve this were put in place. It is therefore no surprise that 11 years down the road AMISOM has not been able to control weaponry in the hands of the Somali military, let alone put a credible Somali force in place for when it finally withdraws.

The situation was further complicated when Resolution 1725 was overtaken by events in Somalia. Most importantly, the resolution did not envisage the Ethiopian-led occupation of Mogadishu and its consequences. When the AU Peace and Security Council authorized AMISOM in January 2007 it was in a completely different political context. The process of dialogue was effectively stopped by Ethiopia's campaign to forcibly insert the TFG into Mogadishu. Many Somalis also saw Ethiopian soldiers as an occupying force.

Additional geopolitical factors, including mixed perceptions of AMISOM among large sections of the Somali population, religious extremism within the SCIC, rivalry among neighbouring countries in the Horn of Africa, and links between the SCIC leadership and al-Qaeda, quickly produced a two-sided conflict in Somalia that has lasted from 2006 to the present time. On one side there was an AMISOM force not ready for war—in terms of both its mandate and armament—while on the other there were an estimated 55,000 armed al-Shabaab fighters operating on their own turf, fuelled by nationalist and religious sentiments. The al-Shabaab propaganda machinery has played a significant role against AMISOM troops from then to the present time.

In summary, although AMISOM was supposed to be a peacekeeping mission in both nature and mandate, the situation on the ground quickly transformed it into a counter-terrorism/counter-insurgency/urban warfare force. It is my considered view that for this kind of situation there was a glaring disharmony not only in the mandate and combat order of the military, but also in the general preparations for this mission from the very start. The fundamental ingredients necessary for a successful counter-insurgency operation (such as a strategy, intelligence, resources, and people) were not included in the mission's planning stage.

Somali military

As discussed above, part of AMISOM's mandate was to support the Somali military. However, there were a number of associated challenges: members of the Somali military did not stay put in their barracks, and the force did not have any clear source of logistical supplies, or facilities for the safe storage of firearms and ammunition. Most of its rank and file had not received any formal military training, or training on the codified procedures of an armed force. Planning an operation with such a group also proved difficult due to information leakages to al-Shabaab insurgents.

Despite the dangerous character of the Somali military, AMISOM continued not only to supply it with arms and ammunition, but also to carry out joint combat missions. Inevitably, this ended up creating a vicious cycle whereby arms and ammunitions found their way into the hands of al-Shabaab.

Was there anything AMISOM troops could have done to change the situation? The answer would have been found in a massive reorganization of the Somali military. The international community did not have a unified strategy on this issue, however, and AMISOM had no capacity to do it alone. As expected, continuing to operate alongside such a force (the Somali military) led not only to the increased vulnerability of AMISOM troops to insurgents' attacks, but also to the inadvertent supply of weaponry to the enemy.

AMISOM: experiences of the Burundian and Ugandan contingents

Due to the sensitivity surrounding the issue of troops sent from TCCs to AMISOM, I will discuss this matter in general terms based on codified military standards worldwide. It is hoped that this will enable the reader to fully appreciate the gaps created by the lack of standards, which made a difficult mission even more difficult. In an attempt to paint the correct picture, I will briefly discuss the Burundian and Ugandan contingents in AMISOM separately. Note that they formed the AMISOM mission for the first five years of its life.

Burundian military

The Burundi National Defence Force (BNDF) was itself a product of military integration carried out as part of the peace process after Burundi's civil war (1993–2006). It is therefore likely that Burundi's deployment to Somalia was to a large extent part of a desire to consolidate, strengthen, and create cohesion and professionalism within the newly integrated national army. One would not have expected particularly high standards with regard to military professionalism and the accumulation of military equipment in this force. Indeed, the high-intensity situation in Somalia led to the Dayniile debacle of 2011.

On 20 October 2011 three battalions of AMISOM BNDF troops supported by a detachment of Ugandan T-55 battle tanks and two brigades of the Somali National Army (SNA) were tasked with seizing and occupying an area north of Mogadishu's suburbs and south of Dayniile. This was an important military objective because several hundred al-Shabaab insurgents held the area. Furthermore, from Dayniile town there was a crucial route via a cigarette factory into central Mogadishu that was used as a conduit for al-Shabaab to smuggle components for improvised explosive devices into the city.

Hours after the operation started the Burundian commander split his forces to approach the target area in two columns. As they were entering a small built-up area of Digmale, soldiers from one of the battalions in the western column saw what they believed were friendly Somali troops approaching from their left flank. The approaching troops were moving rapidly towards them, but since they seemed to be wearing SNA uniforms, the BPDF troops held their fire. In reality, the advancing column consisted of al-Shabaab troops launching a counter-attack from the Afgoye corridor. These al-Shabaab insurgents were able to open fire on the AMISOM troops at close range with heavy machine guns, not only causing the deaths of dozens of troops, but also capturing a large number of firearms and large quantities of ammunition. This was the single biggest loss of AMISOM personnel and equipment.

Could the attack have been avoided? I think not under the circumstances in which AMISOM troops operated, including:

- the nature of the mission (that is, trying to keep peace where there was none to keep);
- AMISOM's diminished capacity in terms of combat order;
- the mix of both counter-insurgency and urban operations; and
- the poorly equipped AMISOM troops.

It is my strong belief that the Dayniile operation would have yielded different results if, for example, the AMISOM force had been in possession of unmanned aerial vehicles, combat helicopters, or some kind of air surveillance capacity to view the battlefield and be able to detect such a counter-attack by al-Shabaab insurgents.

The debacle led to the loss of military equipment (both small arms and ammunition) to al-Shabaab that facilitated its operations for months—if not years—which in turn perpetuated human suffering in the country.

Ugandan military

Uganda's official explanation for the decision to lead AMISOM was based on pan-African solidarity and the desire to jointly fight terrorism in the region. This deployment operated under the theme of 'African solutions to African problems'.

Uganda's military, the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF), had relatively better standards and equipment, standard operating procedures, and battle-experienced troops by the time it deployed to Somalia. Compared to Burundi, which had experienced a long period of civil war, the Ugandan military had over 20 years of operational experience as one force, as well as intervals of peace that were used for training, consolidation, and to build up cohesion. With this background, therefore, it is

only fair to conclude that the Ugandan military was at an advantage compared to the Burundian forces in the joint AMISOM venture.

Despite this, many other aspects of the operational environment affected the two militaries equally. These included the absence of:

- a reasonably capable and disciplined local military force to work with;
- a supportive local population;
- the availability of force enablers or quick-impact projects to alleviate the suffering of Somalis and in turn work as an incentive for the population to support peace; and
- a cohesive effort by international actors to rebuild the Somali military.

These, among other factors, were responsible for the losses that the UPDF suffered, such as in September 2011, when al-Shabaab insurgents disguised in Somali military uniforms accessed a UPDF defence post near Mogadishu stadium, as well as the Janaale incident of September 2015, when a UPDF detachment was attacked, resulting in significant losses, both human and materiel.

There were a number of other challenges during my tenure of command. These included the issue of the protection of civilians during asymmetric warfare in built-up areas and the—most controversial—issue of causing inadvertent harm to civilians during combat operations inside Mogadishu city. Other issues included al-Shabaab propaganda against AMISOM, international organizations' exaggerations of civilian casualties as a result of peacekeepers' use of firepower during combat operations, and allegations of sexual exploitation by AMISOM troops. The issue of civilian casualties (collateral damage) was a thorn in AMISOM's side because it negatively influenced local perceptions of AMISOM operations, thereby undermining its operational effectiveness. Bureaucratic tendencies in the UN Support Office for AMISOM also presented a stumbling block during this period.

AMISOM arms and ammunition inventory control policies

During my tenure of duty as a force commander I observed that although AMISOM was under the continental AU flag, to all intents and purposes it operated and behaved as a 'coalition of the willing'. I saw that this in turn led to difficulties related to command and control in a number of areas, including achieving proper accountability for arms and ammunition. Force commanders' requests for accountability were not always adhered to, for example. It was also easier for contingent commanders to send arms and ammunition stock records to their respective capitals than to AMISOM

force headquarters. I think this situation must have become worse when more TCCs sent troops to the mission area.

The short life span of the AU means that relevant procedures have not been fully developed, and where they have been, there is a wide gap between theory and practice. This places the responsibility for accountability on individual TCCs. The lack of pre-mission standardized training on accountability for arms and ammunition made an already bad situation worse, because each TCC relied on procedures applied in its home country. The effect of this was a heightened risk of loss for TCCs, particularly those without robust arms and ammunition control policies at home.

The discussion above is intended to highlight the operational environment in which AMISOM military force commanders worked. I will now proceed to briefly discuss the arms and ammunition control policy of the Ugandan military, to which I belong. Again, for the reasons discussed above, one inevitably fell back on these procedures.

The Ugandan military has a robust inventory control policy for weapons and ammunition that covers:

- the detection and deterrence of theft from storage facilities;
- the tracking of weapons to individual soldiers;
- the prevention of excessive accumulation of arms supplies; and
- the avoidance of excess items such as expired ammunition.

Continuous implementation of the policy focuses on a range of practical steps, including the maintenance of accurate and up-to date registers or records of arms and ammunition; regular inspections of weapons; regular maintenance of ammunition and arms depots; and periodic audits of records, policies, and practices. Such measures make it difficult for arms and ammunition to leave stores without detection.

Conclusion

Whereas AMISOM has made great progress in its war against terror, at the same time it faces challenges that originate from the absence of a strategy on certain issues. This includes the absence of agreement on a unified way forward in relation to reconstructing the Somali security forces. As a result, 11 years after AMISOM first deployed, the international community finds itself unable to develop a realistic withdrawal plan for AMISOM troops, because this would enable al-Shabaab to recapture the country. At the same time, AMISOM's continued presence in Somalia has its own risks: these include troops over-staying their welcome and generating hostility from Somalis.

Alongside the different levels of training among soldiers from TCCs, pre-mission training about weaponry controls was never given the priority it deserved. In line with this, an inventory of all weapons being used by troops involved in peacekeeping

operations should be forwarded and kept at continental headquarters; this would help future tracking of peacekeepers' weaponry both during and after missions.

Ironically, although the international community expected AMISOM's military component to support the Somali military in creating security stability, at the same time the UN imposed an arms embargo on the country. Coupled with the absence of a continentally developed policy on how to process captured or recovered weapons and ammunition, this resulted in individual AMISOM unit commanders using recovered weapons to arm the Somali military in pursuance of military operations against al-Shabaab.

Winning the hearts and minds of the local population by delivering quick-impact projects in liberated areas not only saves the lives of the starving population, but also works as an incentive for the population to pursue peace, as opposed to war. The international community has not fully understood that successful peace support operations, especially in Africa, will require commensurate reforms at UN headquarters with regard to mission mandates and armament, as well as policies to win the hearts and minds of local populations. If this is not addressed, the world body will continue to see different outcomes from those that deployments seek to achieve.

The UN also needs to address the structural causes of conflict(s) on the African continent, especially issues related to (the absence of) democratic governance, since it is bad governance that leads to these conflicts. In situations where conflicts have already erupted, the international community should try to prevent them from becoming protracted—like the ongoing conflicts in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo—in order to save both human lives and resources.

Although the prolonged conflict put the security of both the Horn of Africa and East Africa regions at risk, there was never an attuned strategy on how to solve long-term political challenges, such as the issue of whether to establish a strong federalist system or to empower the various Somali regions and then use them as building blocks for a future strong federal Somalia. It is my considered opinion that this unresolved issue feeds into al-Shabaab's propaganda.

To conclude, my experience as AMISOM force commander taught me four key lessons that I would like to share:

1. The largest number of AMISOM weapons found their way into the wrong hands not as a result of the deliberate actions of peacekeepers (for example, for financial gain), but rather from the national forces that the peacekeepers were tasked to support and work alongside.
2. Peace operations require better planning, especially in matters related to standardized training on dealing with captured and recovered arms and ammunition.

3. Policy-makers at many levels (within the AU and UN) grossly misunderstand peacekeeping missions in Somalia and, indeed, on the African continent more generally, which tends to make conflicts more protracted and difficult to resolve.
4. The proliferation of weapons and ammunition from peace operations in a number of African countries is a symptom of much larger problems whose cure lies in proactively seeking to address the causes of conflicts and preventing their further escalation when they have already erupted.