

# Arms and ammunition losses from peace support operations: global research findings and prevention strategies

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## Background

Until recently the issue of the management and loss of arms and ammunition in PSOs did not draw much attention. There has been a widespread presumption that troops contributing to PSOs exercise uniformly high levels of control over their own lethal and non-lethal equipment, and that when losses occur they are most likely inevitable. A related belief is that some (mostly small) losses are probably simply 'the cost of doing business'.

These assumptions were, however, untested and unsupported by empirical research or rigorous investigations. Problematically, the whole subject of arms losses and any control measures that might be in place was and remains sensitive and subject to a lack of transparency that makes conducting investigations difficult. Internal assessments that are conducted—through, for example, after-incident reporting and inquiries—are generally not made publicly available. However, a number of large-scale incidents were so significant, and were accompanied by so much loss of life, that they broke through the curtain of obscurity to provide hints, at least, that the picture might not be as positive as it is generally assumed to be.

From 2011 onwards the Small Arms Survey began to study this phenomenon in increasing detail, first by collecting publicly available information about incidents of losses of arms and ammunition. Since UN reporting was more readily available than for other PSOs, and because the Survey is particularly active in Africa, early data collection focused on UN operations in Africa. In parallel, the Survey began to assess what measures were in place to manage arms and ammunition in PSOs and among troop contributors, as well as policy and procedural gaps.

This focus falls under the Survey's areas of concern because weapons moving out of peacekeepers' control into conflict zones pose threats not only to local communities, but to peacekeepers themselves. This, in turn, negatively affects popular perceptions of the peacekeeping forces' effectiveness. The Survey's project to understand and address arms losses is aimed at supporting and enhancing mandate implementation and force protection rather than naming and shaming particular TCCs/PCCs for the under-performance of their personnel.

With the establishment of the MPOME project in December 2016, whose first phase runs through March 2019, our research effort made significant progress in terms of

securing both resources and political support from a range of governments and regional organizations. Over the course of the last two years the project has expanded its focus beyond African PSOs to non-UN missions such as those led by NATO, the EU, and other regional organizations. As the information base for understanding the phenomenon has grown, the project has also been able to move from performing a purely documentary function to a capacity-building role.

This paper briefly reviews the MPOME project's research findings with regard to the loss of arms and ammunition from PSOs to date, and its growing efforts to support TCCs/PCCs and regional organizations to improve practice in this regard and reduce future losses of materiel. The Survey sees this area as increasingly intertwined with other parallel reform efforts, such as the force protection agenda, efforts by the UN and regional organizations to reduce illicit small arms proliferation in conflict and post-conflict zones, and other international peace and security initiatives.

## Documenting losses

The Survey determined that the best way to introduce the issue of arms and ammunition losses in PSOs was through a combined country case study. We chose Sudan and South Sudan because of the Survey's long-standing existing research initiative in those countries (known as the Human Security Baseline Assessment, launched in 2006) and the fact that this theatre has been the site of a long sequence of PSOs for more than a decade, including those fielded by the AU, the UN, and the current joint UN-AU Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Sudan, as well as multinational intervention forces in South Sudan.

The Survey's findings from this initial study are documented in the report *Under Attack and Above Scrutiny? Arms and Ammunition Diversion from Peacekeepers in Sudan and South Sudan, 2002–14* (Berman and Racovita, 2015), which identified more than a hundred attacks on peacekeepers over the period 2005–14, at least half of which resulted in weapons losses. At least 20 of these attacks were 'notable' in terms of the quantities of ammunition lost, which together totalled at least 750,000 rounds. These incidents alone were also responsible for the loss of at least 500 weapons, among them pistols, assault rifles, machine guns (including heavy machine guns), grenade launchers, anti-tank weapons, and mortars. Due to the lack of transparency around reporting on such incidents, as well as the Survey's very conservative approach to estimating losses, these findings have to be regarded as a very partial estimate of what truly occurred.

Perhaps even more significant were the findings about the overall context and situations that give rise to weapons and ammunition losses. We found that losses are not rare events—and that sometimes they are large in scale. Reporting and record-keeping are imperfect, at best, and political sensitivities affect non-reporting.

Importantly, diversion is clearly not always due to peacekeepers being in the ‘wrong place at the wrong time’.

Finally, apart from these findings about the loss of COE, the study drew attention to an associated area that had not received much attention: the management of arms and ammunition that peacekeepers recover or seize from negative forces or capture through disarmament exercises. The message from the initial study in Sudan and South Sudan was clear that oversight of such weapons was a significant ‘grey area’ and likely to be subject to under-performance and corruption.

These initial findings indicated that the issue of weapons and ammunition losses from PSOs deserved further study. For one thing, the possible objection that Sudan and South Sudan presented a ‘special case’ needed to be addressed. After all, it might be thought that materiel losses there are due to particularly poorly trained PSO personnel; the particular obstructiveness of the host countries; or the low morale of the mission and the reluctance of some contingents to deter, through active engagement, potentially hostile forces. The only way to answer these and related questions was to expand the research base and draw on information from as many PSOs as possible.

In 2016 the Survey established the Peace Operations Data Set (PODS), the only repository of global data on losses of arms, ammunition, and materiel from both UN and non-UN PSOs. Since then, PODS has been populated with information from UN and other reports, press releases, key informant interviews, and articles from reputable media outlets, focusing primarily on ‘notable’ incidents (that is, events that include the loss of ten or more weapons or 500 or more rounds of ammunition) that occurred during missions.

In October 2017 the Survey published its first study based on this expanded effort (Berman, Racovita, and Schroeder, 2017). It found that the Sudan–South Sudan case study significantly underestimated the true scale and scope of losses; that globally, although a small percentage of deployed equipment is lost, stolen, or seized by armed groups and criminals, this likely comprises thousands of weapons and millions of rounds of ammunition; and that even the UN has no institutionalized procedures for managing arms and ammunition recovered outside of formal recovery programmes—despite the fact that the scale of this materiel can be sizeable.

Here too the numbers are only part of the story. Analysis of incidents recorded in PODS provides insights into the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of losses, showing that:

- losses are a global and pervasive problem, affecting missions across geographical regions, operating in different threat environments, and involving contingents from many different countries;

- peacekeepers are susceptible to losing equipment during the course of everyday activities, such as patrols and escort duties, but also during resupply operations, troop rotations, and repatriation; and
- the loss of arms and ammunition is not limited to military missions. Armed guards deployed as part of unarmed civilian missions have also lost weapons and other materiel, underscoring the importance of establishing rigorous safeguards in all missions.

The Survey is continuing to expand PODS to include smaller-scale losses and the seizure of vehicles equipped with weapons. In future the database may also capture data on the loss of non-lethal equipment.

Not all of what has been learned about weapons losses and arms management is drawn from official reports. An integral part of our understanding of the dynamics of losses, current management practices, and possible gaps and needs is achieved through consultations with TCCs/PCCs and regional organizations that field PSOs. Through a series of regional workshops, the Survey has improved its understanding of the realities of practices on the ground in a variety of different contexts. Former and current force commanders, sector commanders, heads of missions, and other technical personnel have contributed to these conversations, and helped to identify gaps in both knowledge and the implementation of existing policies, as well as key challenges and the need for specialized training. They have also helped to bridge the gap between what is officially reported and what really happens on the ground—an essential distinction if sound policies and mechanisms are to be developed and implemented.

## Improving WAM in PSOs

### Implementing existing and emerging standards

In parallel to the documentation of losses from PSOs, the Survey has assessed the state of the policy and procedural landscape with regard to WAM in PSOs, based on publicly available information.

At the global level, the UN has developed detailed policies, procedures, and guidelines on securing arms and ammunition during PSOs. These safeguards are elaborated in numerous documents, many of which are not publicly available. Nevertheless, although the system through which the UN manages COE provides a framework for the establishment of rigorous mission-level stockpile security systems, in reality stockpile security, record-keeping, and reporting practices can vary significantly from mission to mission, and even within the same mission. Some less-than-ideal practices are common, such as the long-term use of ‘temporary’ small arms storage structures (Schroeder, 2016).

As already noted, the UN does not provide standard guidance on the management of weapons recovered by PSOs, but in early 2018 two inter-agency working groups were established under the UNDPKO chief of staff to review current practices and develop guidance on WAM for COE, UN-owned equipment, and weapons and ammunition seized in field missions. The working groups comprise representatives from UNDPKO, UNDFS, UNDP, and UNMAS, as well as subject matter experts (UN, 2018).

Arguably, improving practices in PSOs fielded by regional and subregional organizations is as important as in those fielded by the UN, given that some of the most dangerous deployments—and contexts in which sizeable volumes of weapons and ammunition are recovered from negative forces—are led by organizations other than the UN. Two notable examples are the AU Mission in Somalia and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin.

At the regional level the AU launched a process in 2017 linked to its Silencing the Guns by 2020 initiative that will generate a policy on the management of recovered weapons in all AU-mandated peace operations. The Survey has been an active partner in this process, supporting the AU to convene its member states, regional economic communities, and regional mechanisms in a consultative process that generated a policy draft that was validated on 5 November 2018 at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa. Now that the draft policy has been validated, the Survey hopes to work with the AU to disseminate the policy and hold a series of briefings and training sessions for key mission personnel. This will help to kick start the policy's implementation in addition to setting up systems to monitor its uptake.

Notably, two subregional organizations have made more progress than the AU, insofar as they have already committed—at least on paper—to establishing mechanisms to improve controls over weapons that peacekeepers from their member states deploy with, or recover, during peace operations:

- **ECOWAS.** The ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons (2006), which came into force in 2009, is a legally binding instrument that requires the organization's 15 members to provide the ECOWAS Secretariat with data on weapons deployed to and repatriated from mission areas, and on the destruction of any weapons they recover. The ECOWAS Commission is currently engaged in a consultative process with its missions and troop contributors to establish the standardized reporting mechanisms needed to operationalize these obligations. A number of technical problems must be addressed before the required databases can be established.
- **ECCAS.** The Kinshasa Convention (2010), which is the small arms convention agreed by ECCAS member states, became operational in 2017, and among other things addresses the management of COE in PSOs. It is politically binding and requires the ECCAS secretary-general to establish a subregional electronic data-

base of weapons used in PSOs. It also obliges ECCAS member states to report on the weapons and ammunition used in PSOs, as well as the establishment of national registers. As in the case of the ECOWAS Convention, the operationalization of these requirements has not yet occurred. But at the first ECCAS Convention of States Parties in June 2018 the organization committed itself to full implementation. Cameroon will lead this initiative, which will have implications not only for the MNJTF, but also for the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), to which Cameroon is a significant troop contributor.

Because of the infancy of these initiatives, many TCCs from ECOWAS and ECCAS are not yet aware of the obligations and expectations imposed on them by the above instruments. The policies and procedures that they currently implement—which vary significantly from mission to mission and sector to sector—remain largely ad hoc. The extent to which international good practice guidelines are adhered to, such as those related to record-keeping, PSSM, and the IATG, is unknown.

### Capacity building: tools and training

It will take time for the new and improved policies, procedures, and practices described above to be developed and operationalized. In the meantime, steps should be taken to improve current practice and best practice guidelines on which to draw. But these good practices and lessons learned need to be consolidated and offered as part of training programmes to TCCs/PCCs and the political and military heads of missions. In regional consultations with TCCs/PCCs, mission officials, and others, this ‘training gap’ was repeatedly noted.

In response to this need the Survey is developing a three-day training course on WAM and counter-diversion in PSOs that will cover:

- existing normative and legal frameworks;
- what is known about high-risk environments and activities in which losses can occur;
- best practices in PSSM;
- situational awareness and intelligence gathering;
- intra-mission coordination;
- checks and balances; and
- building integrity and preventing corruption (MPOME, 2018).

The initial course will be finalized for use before the end of March 2019 and the Survey envisions holding the first training sessions thereafter in cooperation with one or more regional training centres of excellence. In parallel with this training course, the Survey is also developing associated tools, such as model reporting templates for arms recovered during PSOs.

As recognition of the importance of WAM in PSOs has grown, a number of governments have signalled their intention to play an active role by reviewing current practices and supporting a forward-looking policy agenda. The Government of Uruguay was the first to join the MPOME project as a bilateral partner, and it has been followed recently by Senegal and Indonesia. These partnerships provide the foundation to dig deeper and learn more about current practices around WAM, training, and support needs, and to work closely together to support excellence and leadership in this area.

## The future: converging agendas and integrating practices

As the first phase of the MPOME project draws to a close, its second phase (from April 2019) is coming into clearer view. Looking ahead, it is important that a number of initiatives continue to gather momentum:

- Existing policy development and implementation processes need to move forward at the global, regional, and subregional levels and secure the necessary political and donor support.
- The MPOME training modules developed in Phase 1 need to be fielded and tested, and related learning evaluated to measure its positive impact on practice.
- Large TCCs/PCCs also need to review their WAM practices and align them, as necessary, with emerging norms and relevant legal and political agreements.

In parallel, the WAM in PSOs agenda should begin to be connected more explicitly with other reform and accountability initiatives designed to enhance the performance of PSOs. Whether this will lead to a ‘performance criteria’ system is not yet clear. But given that COE losses and the mismanagement of recovered materiel negatively impact credibility and pose significant safety and strategic risks to both troops and civilians, WAM considerations should at least be part of that conversation.

Finally, WAM in PSOs is one piece of a larger effort to prevent the illicit proliferation of weapons in conflict zones—an effort that at the moment is distinctly fragmented and separated among a variety of actors who rarely communicate or collaborate with one another. As the WAM agenda moves ahead, we should look to strengthen coordination and collaboration between peacekeepers’ arms control efforts and other illicit arms flows reduction initiatives, building a more comprehensive approach to reducing negative impacts in conflict zones. As part of this effort, the MPOME project will seek to identify practical measures to strengthen the collection and sharing of information, including on technical weapons intelligence, in PSOs.

## Conclusion

Since the MPOME project was launched in December 2016 the general level of knowledge on the loss of arms and ammunition in PSOs and the management of recovered weapons has grown significantly. Whereas the subject was considered ‘taboo’ in some quarters two years ago, it is now widely accepted to be worthy of both attention and the commitment of resources.

In fact, the issue has gone from an outside concern to one with important linkages with other peacekeeping agendas that are gathering momentum. The UN and AU are both taking important steps forward by reviewing practices and instituting new policies. The MPOME project now counts the AU, Canada, ECOWAS, Germany, Indonesia, NATO, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Senegal, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Uruguay as supporters. Five of these—Canada, Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States—have committed both financial resources and political support.

This represents significant progress in a very short time. Nevertheless, we are some way away from being able to demonstrate widespread commitments to improved practices, let alone the reduction of weapons and ammunition losses. This is the ultimate goal of the initiative, which can only have positive ripple effects for blue and green helmets in terms of mandate implementation and force protection.

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