

18

Ammunition Stockpiles and Communities

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Overview

Ammunition stockpiles present a dilemma to the communities that live in close proximity to them, as well as to national stockpile managers. Both interest groups 'compete' for open spaces near transportation nexuses. As a result, the security of stockpiles and the safety of communities can be at risk. Communities are dynamic entities that often grow and expand into spaces that have previously been designated as safety zones. In the event of ammunition explosion or contamination, this kind of encroachment can result in civilian casualties. Stockpiles can also be problematic because they attract members of the local community for the wrong reasons. They may provide an interesting space, or a source of interesting objects, for playing children. Other members of the community may view them as a potential source of stolen items for resale.

But stockpiles also positively benefit communities by providing employment and broader benefits to local service industries. As a result, there are often extensive linkages between stockpiles and communities, and this results in there being multiple stakeholders in their management. Stockpile authorities therefore have the responsibility to engage communities, and assist them in making provisions to ensure the safety and security of personnel and materiel, to the benefit of both parties.

Communities next to stockpiles: static and dynamic views of the population

Security force planners tend to make decisions on the location of ammunition stockpiles based on three sometimes contradictory factors. Stockpiles are normally positioned:

1. in wide open spaces to ensure security and minimize the impact of potential explosions;
2. close to transportation nexuses to ensure ease of access; and
3. close to the security forces that use them to ensure uninterrupted supply (CHAPTER 8).

A fourth consideration applies to countries that rely on local paramilitary forces as part of their military doctrine:

4. There is wide dispersal of stockpiles so that they are accessible to local militias, defence units, and other paramilitary groups.

Various permutations of the four factors quite often dictate that major stockpiles are located close to communities—since communities are themselves often positioned close to communication nexuses—and that smaller stockpiles are deliberately placed close to population centres in order to quickly supply the security forces that reside there.

Moreover, populations are dynamic, and this also encourages the proximity of stockpiles and communities. A relatively isolated area chosen for the site of a stockpile can, 20 years later, become home to a large community. In many such cases, this means that the community surrounds and often encroaches on the stockpile and the safety zone around it.

In such cases, the stockpile often becomes integral to the lives of the people living around it, in both positive and negative ways. From the negative perspective, communities are sometimes oblivious of the dangers represented by such stockpiles. The stockpile may even represent an attractive nuisance, because children often consider fences and ‘Keep Out’ signs to be a challenge rather than a barrier. On the positive side, the stockpile can generate wealth for communities, either as a source of legitimate income (employment, services to stockpile personnel) or illegitimate income (theft of brass casings, explosives, or other items).

Awareness

Populations that are aware—of the dangers represented by stockpiles, of security issues, and of the importance of stockpiles for national security—are a mixed

bleasing to policy-makers and stockpile agencies alike. On the one hand, aware populations can draw attention to weaknesses in safety and security, with positive benefits for efficiency and cost-effectiveness. On the other hand, however, local populations can also complain (justifiably or not) about the presence of a stockpile, or about storage practices that may constitute an embarrassment to national authorities. Communities may also protest against the removal of a stockpile if it is viewed primarily as a source of employment or income.

Population growth, particularly in post-conflict societies, tends to lead to all of these issues becoming prominent.

Safety of the population

Even given very high standards of safety, ammunition poses a risk to communities. Explosions at ammunition facilities occur regularly (SEESAC, 2007) (CHAPTER 13), and people that live in close proximity to stockpiles are notoriously vulnerable to such incidents, for at least two reasons:

- *Sheer proximity to events:* Communities that reside close to stockpiles are more likely to be affected by accidents than others.
- *Curiosity:* People are often drawn to the site of an accident or fire, and thus may put their own safety at risk.

Dealing with community concerns

Ensuring the safety and security of communities that reside near ammunition facilities is a primary concern. Finding a balance between providing non-confrontational security and enforcing rules and procedures without compromise is made easier if there is a dialogue with the communities in question. Critically, safety and security measures must be seen to work by the communities they are intended to protect, and this is facilitated by education and media strategies.

Community education

Educating the community on the nature and risks of a stockpile has two major benefits. First, it may reduce the number of incidents involving the intru-

sion of civilians (adults and children) into risky areas. A regular schedule of school or community-related talks by stockpile personnel can help educate communities about the risks of illegal entry, handling munitions, or tampering with security measures.

A second potential benefit of the increased interaction offered by education programmes is that communities can augment the security and safety of stockpiles. By virtue of their proximity, communities are often in a position to alert stockpile personnel of breaches in security (e.g. a broken fence or a case of illegal entry). From the perspective of safety, educated communities are more likely to know what to do (and what not to do) in the event of an accident—for example, taking appropriate cover in the event of an explosion or avoiding visiting the site.

Community education can take place through schools, community associations and clubs, religious institutions, and similar organizations. It is important that those responsible for the stockpile:

- engage in planned and sustained communication with the surrounding community; and
- accept that the community may have legitimate grievances about the stockpile as a potential or actual hazard, and that community complaints must be addressed and dealt with promptly.

Information and the media

The media can also provide a further channel through which stockpile management authorities can better educate communities on stockpiles. Although security concerns often mean that stockpiles and their contents must be kept secret, the ability to communicate with the media—and with the public through the media—can become critically important in case of an accident.

Communities and ecological considerations

Stockpiles can present both an ecological hazard and an ecological benefit to communities.

On the one hand, the presence of explosive/incendiary materials (and toxic chemicals seeping from deteriorating ammunition) can cause major ecological problems that can affect the health of wildlife and, notably, livestock. Toxic chemicals can also seep into the water table, causing serious problems for communities' drinking water.

On the other hand, largely unused, well-enclosed tracts of land that constitute a stockpile area and its safety zone represent potential wildlife sanctuaries and refuges that offer indirect benefits to communities.

However, because such empty areas can attract exploitation, e.g. as a source of food or grazing (notably for the poor), it is important to ensure that stockpile management and community leaders agree on their use. This may include allowing controlled entry (e.g. during certain hours in certain areas) for recreational or subsistence purposes, with the proviso that public safety remains the primary consideration.

Progress to date

While best-practice guides on stockpile management are currently being developed to include ever more detailed criteria,¹ there is little to provide for the issue of stockpile–community relations. These measures are often left to the initiative of local managers and community leaders. Recent major ammunition stockpile catastrophes, such as the 2007 Malhazine case in Mozambique (Wilkinson, 2007), demonstrate that much more progress needs to be made to ensure the safety and security of communities and stockpiles alike.

Conclusion

The tension between the security forces' need to centralize ammunition stocks and the growth of communities can, and has, led to accidents and deaths. If the relationship between communities and ammunition stockpiles is not to become a source of aggravation, certain principles need to be observed carefully and known to both sides. First, stockpile owners need to recognize that communities are dynamic entities, and periodic re-evaluation of ammunition dumps is needed to ensure that safety is maintained. Second, safety rules should never be com-

promised, safety zones must be enforced without exception, and access routes must be kept clear. Third, stockpile managers must take the lead in ensuring that potential dangers are well known to the populace, and that the relevant emergency procedures are put in place and practised in case of emergency.

Whatever the expense, improving the relationship between stockpile ownership and management, on the one hand, and community interests, on the other, is critical for ensuring that communities are protected to the highest degree possible from the effects of living near an ammunition stockpile. ■

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's forthcoming best practice guide, sections of which exist in draft form (OSCE, 2003, sec. VII, para. 38).

Further reading

Wilkinson, Adrian. 2007. *Malhazine (Mozambique) Explosion Site 'Quick Look' Technical Summary*. Belgrade: SEESAC. 28 March.

Bibliography

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