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Trading Life, Trading Death

The Flow of Small Arms from
Mozambique to Malawi

By Gregory Mthembu-Salter



A Working Paper of the Small Arms Survey in
cooperation with the Institute for Security Studies (ISS)

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Small Arms Survey
Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies
47 Avenue Blanc, 1202 Geneva
Switzerland

Published in Switzerland by the Small Arms Survey
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First published January 2009

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Copyedited by Alex Potter
Proofread by John Linnegar

Typeset in Optima and Palatino by Richard Jones (rick@studioexile.com),
Exile: Design & Editorial Services

Cartography by MAP*grafix*

Printed by coprint, Geneva

ISBN 2-8288-0103-9

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Abbreviations

CHRR	Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
MPS	Malawi Police Service
MRA	Malawi Revenue Authority
MWK	Malawi kwacha
MYP	Malawi Young Pioneers
NFP	National Focal Point (on Small Arms)
YD	Young Democrats
USD	United States dollar

About the author

Gregory Mthembu-Salter is a writer and researcher on African political economy and has published widely on diverse topics, including cross-border trade, small arms proliferation, refugee militarization, telecommunications, terrorism financing, human rights, the impact of sanctions, and natural resource exploitation. In 2007–08 he served as a finance expert on the UN Panel of Experts monitoring a UN arms embargo on the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Acknowledgements

Particular thanks are due to Inspector Noel Kayira, chair of the Malawi National Focal Point on Small Arms, who not only gave generously of his own time, but also enabled much of the research on which this Working Paper is based to take place. I am also indebted to Undule Mwakasungula of the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation in Lilongwe for freely dispensing useful documentation, contacts, and wise insights derived from years of researching and combating small arms proliferation in the country. Also wonderfully helpful were Maclean Kaluwa and K. Z. Nyamasauka of the National Statistical Office in Zomba, who dredged up the minutiae of Malawi's bilateral trade with Mozambique from their computers with good grace and no advance notice. Thank you to you all; though—of course—all errors and omissions are mine, and mine alone.



Introduction

In a region apparently awash with weapons and plagued with rising levels of armed crime, Malawi is a welcome exception to these characteristics. In early 2007 there were only 9,320 legally registered firearms in Malawi excluding those used by the security forces,¹ compared to just under 87,000 in Zambia (Mtonga and Mthembu-Salter, 2004, p. 286) and nearly 4 million in South Africa (Gould et al., 2004, p. 133). Though a country of an estimated 13 million people, in the 5 years between 1996 and 2000 Malawi suffered just 2,161 reported cases of armed robbery (Mwakasungula and Nungu, 2004, p. 89). For 2005 the figure was 316 and for 2004 it was 263, according to figures provided by the Malawi Police Service (MPS). Even leaving aside South Africa, where there were 119,726 recorded cases of aggravated robbery in 2006 (SAPS, 2006), Malawi's armed crime statistics still compare favourably with the rest of the region. In neighbouring Zambia, for example, where there is a population of only 10 million people, there were 3,168 reported cases of armed robbery in the 5 years between 1998 and 2002 (Mtonga and Mthembu-Salter, 2004, p. 294). 📄

The bilateral trade context

Malawi's Central and Southern provinces both border on Mozambique, with the Northern Province the only exception, neighbouring Zambia and Tanzania instead. Malawi and Mozambique enjoy friendly relations and are both members of the Southern African Development Community. Most of Malawi's imports come into the country via Mozambique, and most of its exports leave via Mozambique. Mozambique is one of the country's main trading partners, exporting goods there provisionally recorded as worth MWK 20.5 billion (USD 141 million) in 2006 and MWK 17.3 billion (USD 119 million) in 2005, almost 13 per cent of Malawi's total imports that year (National Statistical Office, 2006, p. 89).²

There is a large trade imbalance between Malawi and Mozambique, with recorded Malawian exports to Mozambique in 2006 worth only a tenth of the value of Mozambique's exports to Malawi. Malawi's exports to Mozambique comprised about 4 per cent of its recorded export total. The trade imbalance

Table 1 **Main Mozambican exports to Malawi, 2006 (MWK millions)***

Commodity	Value
Fuel	7,277.1 (USD 50.0 million)
Wheat	2,385.4 (USD 16.6 million)
Tobacco	2,086.0 (USD 14.4 million)
Maize	316.5 (USD 2.9 million)
Vegetable oil	187.5 (USD 1.3 million)
Beans	145.6 (USD 1.0 million)
Total exports**	20,577.3 (USD 142 million)

* Provisional data only.

** The total includes other items not listed in the table.

Source: National Statistical Office³

Table 2 **Main Malawian exports to Mozambique, 2006 (MWK millions)***

Commodity	Value
Tobacco	820.1 (USD 5.7 million)
Unused banknotes and cheques	232.4 (USD 1.6 million)
Vehicles	219.8 (USD 1.5 million)
Soya oil	70.0 (USD 0.5 million)
Soya beans	50.5 (USD 0.3 million)
Household plastics	48.5 (USD 0.3 million)
Total exports**	2,049.9 (USD 14.1 million)

* Provisional data only (see endnote 3).

** The total includes other items not listed in the table.

Source: National Statistical Office

is despite a bilateral trade agreement intended to give Malawian goods preferential access to Mozambican markets.

The strong political relations enjoyed between Malawi and Mozambique do not mean that there are no tensions between the two, particularly in the private sector. A common complaint from the Malawian private sector, echoing the sentiments of business people elsewhere in the region, is the extent of petty official corruption in Mozambique. According to one of Malawi's main transport companies, which regularly plies routes all over southern Africa, Mozambican traffic officials are forever levying stiff penalties for minor and sometimes non-existent faults on its trucks, adding considerably to the company's costs, not just because of the fines themselves, but also because of the time it takes the transporter to arrange payment in order to enable the release of his trucks.⁴ 📄

The extent of the small arms flow from Mozambique to Malawi and the reasons for this

Another widely expressed view about Mozambique in Malawi is that it is where most of the illegal firearms in Malawi come from. According to civil society small arms activist Undule Mwakasungula, who heads the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation in Lilongwe, Malawi faces

a growing proliferation problem . . . attributed to a number of factors. The first factor relates to the residual effect of arms proliferation within the region as a result of the wars against civilians in Mozambique and the related activities of the liberation armies (Mwakasungula, 2004, p. 16).

Researcher Uli Weyl, presenting the findings of his research during 2002 into the scope and extent of small arms proliferation in Malawi to the Malawi National Focal Point Stakeholder meeting in December 2003, stated unequivocally that 'illegal small arms from Mozambique have been the primary reason for small arms proliferation throughout the Region' (Weyl, 2003, p. 2).

There seems little doubt that during Mozambique's civil war, which ended in late 1992, and in the war's immediate aftermath, it was indeed true that the country was a primary source of small arms proliferation in Malawi and elsewhere. Malawi hosted over 650,000 Mozambican refugees during the war, and many of those were still engaged in the conflict despite their refugee status, providing the ideal grounds for refugee militarization (Muggah and Mogire, 2006, pp. 1–27).⁵ It took some years for all the refugees to go home, and during that time small arms proliferation persisted. But it is now 17 years since the civil war ended, and times have changed. Is Mozambique still the main source of small arms proliferation in Malawi?

According to the MPS, the main firearms exported from Mozambique to Malawi are the famed AK-47 assault rifle and the Makarov pistol. The MPS adds that neither firearm is used by the Malawian security forces. The police concede that AK-47s sometimes enter the country via Zambia, but are adamant that the main source of this firearm remains Mozambique.⁶

A significant but largely unresearched source of illegal firearms proliferation is two now-disbanded domestic political militia called the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP) and the Young Democrats (YD). The disarmament of the MYP after the fall of Dr Hastings Banda's regime in 1994 was chaotic and incomplete (Charman, 2003, p. 4), while the YD have never been disarmed and it is not publicly known what has happened to their weapons.⁷ The police are adamant, however, that neither militia used AK-47s or Makarovs. Assuming this to be true, it seems reasonable to assume that the prevalence or otherwise of AK-47s and Makarov pistols is evidence of the supply of firearms from Mozambique to Malawi.

Earlier research on small arms proliferation in Malawi by Andrew Charman found firearms demand in the country to be driven by three factors: organized crime, including poaching; self-defence; and political intimidation (Charman, 2003, p. 2). Organized criminal activities are said by Charman to be closely associated with military weapons such as the AK-47, whereas demand for self-defence is largely fulfilled with South African commercial weapons. Weapons used for political intimidation were, however, not documented by Charman (2003, pp. 4-5).

If Charman is right about the association of organized crime and military weapons like the AK-47, the implication is that indicators of the prevalence of armed crime in Malawi can be taken as evidence for the extent of the influx of firearms from Mozambique. However, in addition to possible unreported Malawi-based arms caches derived from the activities of the MYP and YD, there is also the question of the extent to which 'military-type' firearms belonging to the MPS and other state armed forces are being used for armed crime in the country. The police deny that this latter consideration is an issue, claiming that incidents of firearms stolen from state personnel for crime purposes, or else rented out by them, are 'extremely rare'.⁸ Civil society activists disagree, alleging that, as in the rest of the region, the loan of police- and army-issue guns for crime is a real problem, but is under-reported.⁹

Until further clarity can be provided on the two issues of the use of state firearms in armed crime and the use of firearms derived from MYP and YD arms caches, the proportion of the total number of weapons used for armed crime originating from Mozambique will remain somewhat unclear. A fair

assumption in the meantime would be that some, and potentially most, of the weapons used in armed crime in Malawi come from Mozambique.

As stated above, between 1996 and 2000 a little over 2,000 armed robberies were reported in Malawi. But how reliable are these figures? Under-reporting of crime is an issue in the country, reportedly due to a lack of confidence in the police among sections of the general public, despite the MPS's commitment since the late 1990s to community policing.¹⁰ This is denied by the police, who claim community policing is working well, and that police cooperation is strong with the general public. The police admit, however, that community policing suffers from a lack of resources, meaning it cannot assist the community by supplying the latter with items such as bicycles and mobile phones to improve its ability to monitor and report crime.¹¹ Under-reporting of crime is likely to be particularly problematic for cases of rape, assault, and petty burglary, where victims may judge that the difficulties associated with reporting the crime outweigh the possible benefit of doing so. But with armed robbery, a number of factors may encourage reporting, including insurance requirements, publicity attracted by the crime itself, and any loss of life associated with the crime. This suggests that official statistics should be a fairly reliable reflection of the true picture of armed crime in Malawi. Two thousand-odd armed robbery cases in five years is, of course, two thousand too many, but nonetheless indicate that armed crime, relatively speaking, is not a huge problem in Malawi. And this implies, according to the reasoning process discussed above, that neither is the influx of weapons from Mozambique. Put simply, the evidence suggests weapons do come into Malawi from Mozambique, but only at a trickle.

Why the trickle? There are several possible explanations. It may be that the law enforcement agencies of Malawi and/or Mozambique are preventing more firearms from coming in. There could also be supply-side constraints, meaning that Mozambican arms caches are running low. Or the trickle could instead be the result of reduced demand for weapons for criminal purposes in Malawi itself.

The first explanation appears unlikely. Only one of the Malawi Revenue Authority (MRA) customs officials at Malawi's border crossings with Mozambique interviewed for this study had ever found a firearm coming in, and this

was a pistol coming from South Africa that the owner had failed to declare properly.¹² This extremely low figure may be due to MRA incompetence, but it seems much more likely, as MRA officials and Malawi police on the border all insisted in interviews, that arms smugglers from Mozambique do not use recognized border crossings. After all, they have little need to when the Malawi–Mozambique border is over 1,500 km long, almost entirely devoid of geographical barriers such as rivers or mountains, unfenced, criss-crossed by numerous paths and roads, and largely unpatrolled on either side.¹³

Even if the MRA and its Mozambican counterpart cannot prevent the entry of firearms from Mozambique to Malawi, it remains a possibility that the MPS can apprehend them once they are in the country. While there are many routes entering Malawi from Mozambique, route options are limited between the major urban areas of Lilongwe, Blantyre, and Limbe, where armed crime is particularly prevalent. Furthermore, all main routes between these urban areas have police roadblocks. Yet the MPS confiscated just 95 firearms during 2005–06, of which nine were AK-47s, which was probably only a small fraction of the weapons used in violent crime in Malawi during this period.¹⁴

Some police at roadblocks said they believed the roadblocks had a deterrent effect.¹⁵ This is probably correct, as the knowledge that they may be stopped and searched when travelling between the country's urban areas may indeed discourage potential armed criminals from trying to use these routes for arms smuggling. However, due to major resource constraints, and much to their frustration, police at roadblocks in almost all instances have no vehicles with which to pursue suspects. In a further indication of under-resourcing, radios are no longer functioning at some roadblocks. In addition, police roadblocks have no specialized equipment to detect firearms, and the officers who staff them admit that they rarely conduct thorough searches on vehicles unless there is something obviously suspicious about them, or the officers have received specific intelligence. Police officers also indicated that it was often possible for criminals carrying firearms to split up before roadblocks, ensuring the firearm was walked round the roadblock while the car drove through it, and then the two would reunite further down the road.¹⁶ The net result, said one officer, was that 'there are many firearms coming in we do not catch'.¹⁷

The MPS is painfully aware of its incapacity to prevent small arms proliferation in the country and is taking steps to address the problem. After considerable discussion and debate, beginning in 2003, a National Focal Point (NFP) on Small Arms was established in the country in April 2006. On the NFP are represented all the major stakeholders, including the MPS, civil society, the MRA, and the Department of Immigration. Unfortunately, however, at the time of writing, the NFP has never met, as its chair and a major driver in the whole process, Deputy Commissioner Willard Chingaru of the MPS, died in June 2006. Chingaru was formally replaced in January 2007 by Inspector Noel Kayira, who at the time of writing was hoping to convene the NFP's first meeting as a matter of urgency.

Another important component of the government's efforts to contain proliferation is increasing cooperation with the Mozambican authorities. According to Kayira, Malawi will shortly establish a joint permanent commission on peace and security with Mozambique. There is already another such commission in place between Malawi and Zambia.¹⁸

The key tenet of the NFP is that government agencies must work together to contain small arms proliferation, and that the cooperation in particular of the MPS, MRA, and Department of Immigration is paramount. All three are represented on the NFP, but, perhaps unsurprisingly, since the body has not yet met, awareness of this imperative seemed low on the ground. Police at roadblocks near border crossings understood it as part of their job to assist the MRA in combating the evasion of customs duties by cross-border traders. However, while all MRA and Department of Immigration officials at border crossings interviewed for this study said they worked in cooperation with the MPS, most seemed unsure about how they could improve this cooperation on the specific issue of small arms proliferation.¹⁹

If the success of Malawian law enforcement is not the reason Mozambican firearms enter Malawi at a trickle, the answer may lie with the supply side. Perhaps the Mozambican arms caches are running low. A 2004 study (Leão, 2004) concluded that Operation Rachel, a campaign to destroy Mozambican arms caches conducted jointly by the Mozambican and the South African governments, coupled with a civil society disarmament project called *Transformação das Armas em Enxadas* (Turning Arms into Ploughshares), had achieved a

'large measure of success'. Yet the same study warned that disarmament could not succeed without increased government efforts to curb corruption in the security sector (Leaõ, 2004, p. 111).

The 2004 study reported that illicit firearms costs had risen in South Africa since the onset of Operation Rachel, suggesting diminishing supplies from Mozambique (Leaõ, 2004, p. 110). The cost of illegal firearms appears to be an issue in Malawi too, with a 2003 opinion survey in Malawi reporting that most respondents considered illicit firearms to be expensive (Mwakasungula and Nungu, 2004, p. 89). It does appear entirely possible then that there is a degree of supply-side constraint affecting the flow of illegal small arms from Mozambique to Malawi.

There remains too the third possible explanation for the trickle of firearms, namely a lack of demand in Malawi. Could it be that the country's criminal element either cannot afford or does not think it needs firearms? The question, unfortunately, cannot be answered definitively on the basis of the evidence available. It is certainly plausible, however, that the economic crisis faced by Malawi—which lies 166th out of 177 in the global Human Development Index (UNDP, 2006), lacks the valuable mineral commodities of its neighbours, is over-reliant on one cash crop (tobacco), for which international prices are in decline, and attracts very little foreign direct investment—has had a negative impact on illegal firearms demand.

One of the biggest Malawian transport companies reported that during the first two months of 2007 its trucks were returning 'almost empty' from South Africa after delivering Malawian exports there (predominantly timber, rubber, farm produce, cotton oil cake, cotton lint, cotton seed, and soya beans). The company attributed this not to a lack of import demand in Malawi per se, but to the fact that most potential consumers in the country lacked the resources to pay for imports.²⁰ Also, because of poverty, many potential Malawi-based armed criminals currently lack the means to acquire firearms. In addition, the economic crisis will have meant a reduction in the supply of attractive targets inside Malawi for armed criminal activity, tending to reduce the number of organized criminal gangs able to make a living from seizing such targets.

Another relevant and more positive factor affecting demand is the general lack of a gun culture in the country, reflecting its post-independence history

as one of the few countries in the region that has avoided civil war. The absence of a gun culture manifests itself at many levels. For example, the private security industry locally, while growing fast, remains largely unarmed,²¹ again reducing the incentive of criminal gangs to use firearms in the course of their activities.

In sum, the likely reasons for the reduction in firearms exports from Mozambique to Malawi to a trickle, from a much higher level shortly after the Mozambican civil war, are a fall in supply from Mozambique coupled with weak demand in Malawi. Efforts by the Malawian state to curb the proliferation of small arms do not appear to have had much impact. 📌

Possible Mozambican small arms trade routes into Malawi

Having arrived at some sense of the scale of the flow of arms from Mozambique to Malawi, it is time to consider the routes this flow takes.

Dedza–Calómué

The view at the MPS headquarters in Lilongwe is that the main routes for Mozambican small arms into Malawi are via Dedza and Ntcheu.²² The significance of Dedza for Malawi's transit trade, and to a lesser extent the country's bilateral trade with Mozambique, has been transformed by the completion in 2005 of improvements to the road in Mozambique between Tete and Calómué, which sits adjacent to Dedza on the Mozambican side of the border. The completion of the road has meant that trucks and buses coming to or from Lilongwe and heading to or from South Africa via Zimbabwe or to and from the Mozambican port of Beira can travel via Dedza rather than the longer way round, crossing the Malawi–Mozambique border much further south at Mwanza–Zobué. Before the road was finished, one veteran Malawian clearing agent at the border reported that there would be just two or three trucks a month at Dedza. In early 2007, he estimated there were 200.²³

Buses between Lilongwe and Johannesburg ply the Dedza route every day and are mostly used by Malawian small-scale traders travelling to South Africa to stock up with goods. The traders' goods are of considerable interest to the MRA at Dedza because of the high rates of duty levelled on many of them, and clearing Dedza customs takes each bus several hours. Traders complain bitterly at the hefty duties they have to pay on South African imports, and claim improved MRA efficiency has made it increasingly difficult to evade payment.

The director of a major Lilongwe-based clearing agent disputed the traders' claims, however, outlining a number of corrupt ways to beat the system.

Traders, he claimed, often found out from MRA officials upon leaving Malawi what shifts they would be working in future, and timed their return to ensure they dealt with the same officials coming back, thus facilitating bribery to ensure their goods came through with a lighter tax burden than the rules stated. Larger-scale traders, the clearing agent claimed, often worked through corrupt small-scale clearing agents who do not issue receipts, enabling these agents to use bribery and corruption to ensure goods are cleared quickly and inexpensively.²⁴ Eight members of the MRA team at Dedza were replaced at the end of 2006 for alleged corruption, and, interestingly, at the time of research nearly all the Mozambican customs staff at Calómué were new too.²⁵

The improvements to the Tete–Calómué road have boosted bilateral trade through the Dedza–Calómué crossing too, though recorded trade still remains quite low (see Table 3). One local determinant of trade flows is that residents of the small village of Calómué prefer to shop in Dedza rather than Ulongwé, the nearest Mozambican town of comparative size, which is nonetheless further away than Dedza and has inferior shopping outlets.²⁶ Bilateral trade at Dedza consists largely of fresh and dried fish, and flour, none of which is taxed, freeing up traders to keep transport costs low by using unofficial border crossings. There is also a small trade from Mozambique to Malawi in toilet and washing soaps. These goods attract high duties in Malawi, and so traders, rather than attempting to mis-declare goods at the official border crossing to reduce the tax payable, instead use unofficial border crossings via a network of smaller routes. Traders are often said to use bicycles to transport goods in this way.²⁷

The evidence suggests that if people are bringing in illegal firearms to Malawi from Mozambique via Dedza, they do as the soap traders do, using unofficial

Table 3 **Malawi–Mozambique bilateral trade at Dedza–Calómué border crossing, 2006 (MWK millions)***

Imports from Mozambique	Exports to Mozambique	Total value of trade between Malawi and Mozambique
398.9 (USD 2.8 million)	43.9 (USD 0.3 million)	442.8 (USD 3.1 million)

* Provisional data only (see endnote 3).

Source: National Statistical Office

Table 4 **Illegal firearms recovered by the MPS in Dedza district, 2000–06**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Firearms	4	7	3	3	5	2	7
Of which AK-47	1	6	1	1	2	1	2

Source: Statistics office, MPS, Dedza district

border crossings. MRA officials at Dedza said they had never found a firearm, and their Mozambican counterparts said the same.²⁸ Police at the nearest road-block to the Dedza border crossing (which was one of those with defective police radios) said that they are on the look-out for firearms, but the last time they found one was in 2004.²⁹

Crime statistics for Dedza, however, indicate that firearms probably are coming in from Mozambique. There were 27 armed robberies in Dedza district in 2005, mostly using AK-47s, and 14 in 2006, again mostly using AK-47s.³⁰ Among the principal targets were tobacco farmers in rural parts of the district who had recently sold their crops, but had not banked the money.³¹

Mwanza–Zobué

Dedza’s rise in prominence notwithstanding, Mwanza–Zobué has retained its position as the country’s premier port of entry, handling more transit and bilateral trade than all the others put together. Mwanza is on the main highway

Table 5 **Malawi–Mozambique bilateral trade, 2006 (MWK millions)***

	Imports from Mozambique	Exports to Mozambique	Total
Trade via Mwanza–Zobué border crossing	17,982.2 (USD 124.0 million)	27.5 (USD 0.2 million)	18,009.7 (USD 124.2 million)
Total trade	20,577.3 (USD 142.0 million)	2,049.9 (USD 14.1 million)	22,627.2 (USD 156.0 million)

* Provisional data only (see endnote 3).

Source: National Statistical Office

from Tete in Mozambique to Malawi’s commercial capital, Blantyre, as well as the nearby towns of Limbe and Zomba; and as Table 5 shows, according to provisional trade figures for 2006, nearly 80 per cent of total recorded trade between Malawi and Mozambique in that year passed through this crossing.

The border controls at the Mwanza–Zobué crossing are the most developed in Malawi bar its international airport in Lilongwe, with more staff, more facilities, and more resources than any of the other official border crossings with Mozambique. Yet here too, as at Dedza, there are a myriad unofficial crossings within a relatively short distance of the main road. According to the Mwanza police, if anyone tries to cross undetected from Mozambique in a vehicle, the MPS might catch them, but if they cross by foot, the chances were high of their evading detection.³²

Mwanza police said there used to be a lot of gun running from Mozambique during its civil war and aftermath, but claimed that the problem had subsided considerably since then. Certainly, armed crime levels are very low in Mwanza itself, with only an estimated five cases between 2005 and early 2007.³³ The Mwanza police do not believe, however, that this low figure means that no guns are coming in from Mozambique via Mwanza. Rather, their view is that those weapons that do enter are heading for more lucrative targets in Blantyre and Limbe.³⁴

Biriwiri

The Biriwiri border crossing is ten kilometres north from the busy fresh-produce market town of Ntcheu, which conveniently lies both on the main road from Blantyre to Lilongwe and in the heart of the fertile farmlands of the Central Province. Yet despite Ntcheu’s abundance, bilateral trade through Biriwiri is tiny, because while Biriwiri’s transport links with the rest of Malawi are good, the road on the Mozambican side is very poor, with the result that the border is avoided by most transit and bilateral traders. The exception is trade from Lake Malawi, for whom Biriwiri lies on the most direct route to Zimbabwe and points south. A little way south of Biriwiri lies the unofficial border crossing of Tsangano, which is reported to have a market day once a week much frequented by local Malawians and Mozambicans alike.³⁵

Table 6 **Malawi–Mozambique bilateral trade at Biriwiri border crossing, 2006 (MWK millions)***

Imports from Mozambique	Exports to Mozambique	Total value of trade
0.4 (USD 2,759.00)	2.6 (USD 17,931.00)	3.0 (USD 20,690.00)

* Provisional data only (see endnote 3).

Source: National Statistical Office

In early 2007 the MPS officer in charge at Biriwiri, who came to the post in July 2006, said he had no knowledge of any illegal firearms entering from Mozambique at the crossing, but said there had been eight armed robberies in Ntcheu during 2006. The officer said that in this case, however, the weapons used were Makarov pistols stolen in Malawi. The officer said he knew of no cases of armed robbery using AK-47s in Ntcheu, but could not comment on the situation prior to his arrival.³⁶

The stretch of border between Biriwiri and Tsangano offers some attractions to would-be arms smugglers from Mozambique. It has roads on either side of the border (an unusual occurrence), making it possible to travel by vehicle, but no official border crossings, which means that there is a minimum of state supervision on either side of the border. There is also quite good access from here to the highways to both Lilongwe and Blantyre. Police at MPS headquarters believe Ntcheu is a point of entry for illegal firearms from Mozambique into Malawi,³⁷ and despite the absence of indicators for this around Ntcheu itself, the assertion makes sense and may well be true.

Lengwe National Park

Lengwe National Park, near the southern Malawian towns of Chikwawa and Ntchalo, has the Malawi–Mozambique border as its western boundary, which, like the rest of the park, is unfenced. The small Mozambican towns of Doa and Ancuaze are both very near the park, with both lying on the road between Nhamilábue and the Tete–Zobuè highway.

National parks situated on or near borders in Africa are often used by armed gangs and/or rebel militia, because they provide good cover for hiding out, and they offer financial opportunities in themselves through poaching. The

Nyika National Park in Malawi’s Northern Province is said to have been severely affected over the years by ‘trans-frontier poaching’ and small arms proliferation (Weyl and Charman, 2004, p. 4). The South Luangwa National Park in Zambia is said by the Zambian authorities to have been severely poached by Malawians crossing from Chipata. Zambia’s Kafue National Park has also been subjected to severe poaching both by Angolan refugees and by Zambians who have purchased Angolan firearms.³⁸

According to staff at the Lengwe National Park, however, Mozambicans have never crossed into Malawi via the park. Despite the experience of other national parks in border regions, this claim makes sense, because there is little incentive for Mozambicans wishing to conceal their entry into the country to select such an arduous route as via Lengwe, which requires negotiating thick bush, when there are so many other, much easier unofficial border crossings to choose from outside the park.

Lengwe staff said that there was a poaching problem in the park, but that it was mainly due to traps set by Malawian villagers, and there was little or no poaching with firearms. The staff added, however, that there had in the past been severe poaching with firearms at Lengwe, including with Mozambican military weapons such as AK-47s. The poaching, which staff said was at its most intense during the 1980s and 1990s, resulted in the extinction at Lengwe of all its most valuable game, including elephant, giraffe, rhino, and zebra. Today, the main game remaining are buffalo and a range of buck, including nyala and impala, which have far less commercial value and are hunted mostly for bush meat.³⁹

Other border crossings

Time constraints during the research period prevented visits to Malawi’s other official border crossings with Mozambique. The principal other border crossings are Mulanje and Muloza–Mandimba in the Southern Province. Mulanje is not far from Blantyre and Limbe along a good road, but on the Mozambican side, the nearest town of note is Quelimane on the coast, from where there is unlikely to be much transit or bilateral trade, nor much arms trafficking. Malawian official provisional data fail to show *any* bilateral trade at Mulanje for 2006.⁴⁰

Table 7 **Malawi–Mozambique bilateral trade at Muloza–Mandimba border crossing, 2006 (MWK millions)***

Imports from Mozambique	Exports to Mozambique	Total value of trade between Malawi and Mozambique
314.2 (USD 2.2 million)	21.2 (USD 146,206.00)	335.4 (USD 2.31 million)

* Provisional data only (see endnote 3).

Source: National Statistical Office

Muloza–Mandimba in Mangochi district (on the eastern side of Malawi) handled 1.5 per cent of recorded Malawi–Mozambique bilateral trade in 2006, according to official Malawian figures. The border crossing is the nearest to the major Mozambican town of Nampula and lies on the most direct route between Tete and Nampula, with the result that Mozambicans transit through the crossing en route between these two towns (travelling via Mwanza–Zobué border crossing on the western side of Malawi). Available data shows negligible armed crime rates for Mangochi district, and since the border crossing is far from both Blantyre and Lilongwe and any Mozambican town of note, it seems an unlikely spot for firearms trafficking from Mozambique. 📌

Conclusion

It is a persistent national trait to blame foreigners for one’s troubles, particularly with regard to violent crime. In Europe, politicians and the media habitually blame Chinese triad gangs, Jamaican ‘yardies’, Russian mafia, Albanian mafia, and Nigerian scam artists or pimps in this regard. In Africa, South African law enforcement officials and the media fret about international gangs too, and the impact on crime of alleged hordes of desperate Zimbabwean gangsters crossing the Limpopo River in search of quick money. It is almost a truism in Zambia that Angolan refugees have been and perhaps still are the main cause of the country’s violent crime. Ghanaians are fond of blaming nationals of other less stable West African countries, including Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, for their firearm problems. In Malawi, national opinion seems agreed that the culprits are Mozambican.

Such perceptions are not entirely wrong, and all carry at least a germ of truth in them. Yet what these perceptions also do is obscure, intentionally or unintentionally, the domestic causes of violent crime. Europe has plenty of its own violent criminals; so does South Africa. Ghana is a significant manufacturer of small arms, and exports them to the region.⁴¹ As citizens of two peaceful countries largely surrounded by neighbours that have endured bloody civil wars, Zambians and Malawians may have more cause than most to blame their violent crimes on foreigners. Yet Zambia’s neighbours—including Malawi—complain that *its* gangsters cause trouble abroad, while Zambia’s press regularly features gory stories of violent heists and other such attacks committed entirely by Zambians. In addition, credible allegations of the Zambian police and armed forces hiring out their firearms for others to commit crime are also widespread, particularly for poaching (Mthembu-Salter, 2003, p. 28).

In Malawi, less has been made by domestic civil society and the media than in Zambia about the problem of police and armed forces firearms being loaned out for crime, but the issue appears to be of more significance than the Malawian police are prepared to concede. The degree of official complacency

about what has happened to the firearms of the MYP and YD also appears misplaced. Both militias have left behind domestic firearms caches of unknown size, and far more research into the issue is required before the police's assertion that they are not a significant cause of proliferation of illegal small arms can be accepted with confidence.

With all that said, it nonetheless remains true that the available evidence suggests the inflow of small arms from Mozambique to Malawi, with many of these weapons used for violent crime. Yet the evidence also shows that this is not the problem it once was, and it has been argued above that the flow is likely to be little more than a trickle.

This reduction in flow appears to have little to do with the law enforcement activities of the Malawian or, indeed, the Mozambican state. The Malawi–Mozambique border is entirely porous, with all manner of goods and people flowing across it with ease. As we have seen, transit trade is mostly compelled to use major routes and official border crossings, but bilateral trade, including the export of Mozambican weapons, happens mostly away from official border crossings, traders often crossing the border on foot where neither the Malawian nor the Mozambican authorities have the capacity to monitor it. Many of the weapons imported this way may subsequently find their way into vehicles that ply Malawi's major routes, encountering police roadblocks on the way. But without specific intelligence suggesting that they do otherwise, the police appear more than likely to wave these vehicles on without a thorough search, enabling the illegal firearms to pass through.

Instead, the main reasons for the reduction in the flow of illegal firearms from Mozambique to Malawi are likely to be a fall in both supply and demand. It has been argued that in the case of supply, this is due to the success—however partial—of disarmament operations within Mozambique. The most plausible thesis explaining the fall in demand in Malawi appears to be worsening poverty, which has made firearms and their ammunition less affordable to would-be violent criminals, and which has reduced the number of lucrative targets that might tempt them. Another important part of the explanation is the absence of a strong gun culture in the country, which appears to be a happy by-product of its having avoided civil war throughout the entire post-independence period.

The limited research conducted in Malawi for this study lends weight to the MPS thesis that the Dedza district is a popular entry point for Mozam-

bican weapons into the country. The district lies conveniently between the capital, Lilongwe and the main road south to Zimbabwe and beyond, and armed crime figures are unusually high in Dedza by Malawian standards. Mwanza district is also likely to be an illegal firearms entry point, though there is little direct evidence for this, with the main indicator instead being the level of violent crime further along the road in the commercial capital, Blantyre. There is little evidence to suggest that other border regions are significant areas for the inflow of Mozambican weapons.

Complacency about firearms proliferation is probably always a mistake, particularly in such a volatile region as southern Africa. Yet over-hyping the issue is unhelpful too. Malawi has one of the lowest violent crime rates in Africa, if not the world. Encouragingly for the authorities, at least part of the explanation is the apparent antipathy of much of the population towards firearms. Less encouragingly for the authorities, however, their own law enforcement efforts appear to have had little or no impact on the situation. The implication is that if the situation changes, and illegal firearms supply, demand, or both start rising, the result will be proliferation.

Recognizing the need to improve the state's response to small arms proliferation, Malawi established an NFP on Small Arms in early 2006. That was a good start on a long road, but not much has happened since. The NFP needs regular meetings, plus the political support and resources to fulfil its mandate, particularly by raising awareness among MPS, MRA, and Department of Immigration officials in the field about firearms proliferation issues, and about ways to improve and deepen their cooperation. At the regional level, the proposed joint commission between Malawi and Mozambique needs to become a reality, and, as with the NFP, be given sufficient political backing and resources to do its job. Further resources directed at existing structures would not go amiss too. Police roadblocks, for example, are over-staffed by under-paid and under-resourced police. This encourages corruption, but does little to cut crime or halt small arms proliferation.

Malawians should remain vigilant about the inflow of illegal firearms from Mozambique and, indeed, all Malawi's neighbours. But they should not blind themselves to domestic firearms proliferation issues regarding either the disbanded political militia or the police and armed forces' own weapons. Violent crime, like charity, usually begins at home. 📌

Endnotes

- 1 Interview with Inspector Noel Kayira, projects officer, Community Policing Services Branch, headquarters, Malawi Police Service (MPS), Lilongwe, 21 February 2007.
- 2 The exchange rate according to which USD values for MWK amounts was calculated was MWK 145:USD 1 in February 2007, when the research was conducted.
- 3 All trade statistics given in this and the following tables were supplied verbally by the National Statistical Office from printouts of its data. The author was not permitted either to see or to copy the data supplied.
- 4 Interview with operations manager, transport company, Lilongwe, 22 February 2007.
- 5 Note that Muggah and Mogire (2006) look at what constitutes ideal grounds for refugee militarization; they do not specifically address the Malawi–Mozambique case.
- 6 Interview with Inspector Noel Kayira, projects officer, Community Policing Services Branch, headquarters, MPS, Lilongwe, 21 February 2007.
- 7 E-mail from Undule Mwakasungula, director of the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR), Lilongwe.
- 8 Interview with Inspector Noel Kayira, projects officer, Community Policing Services Branch, headquarters, MPS, Lilongwe, 21 February 2007.
- 9 Interview with Undule Mwakasungula, director of the CHRR, Lilongwe, 12 February 2007.
- 10 Interview with Undule Mwakasungula, director of the CHRR, Lilongwe, 12 February 2007.
- 11 Interview with Inspector Noel Kayira, projects officer, Community Policing Services Branch, headquarters, MPS, Lilongwe, 21 February 2007.
- 12 Interviews with MRA personnel at Dedza, Biriwiri, and Mwanza, February 2007.
- 13 Interview with Sub-inspector Flemmings, MPS, Mwanza, 16 February 2007.
- 14 Data provided by the Research and Planning Information Desk, MPS, February 2007.
- 15 Interview with Sub-inspector Patrick Mangame, Bunda MPS roadblock, 15 February 2007.
- 16 Interview with MPS officers at roadblocks near Dedza, Ntcheu, and Mwanza, February 2007.
- 17 Interview with Sub-inspector Patrick Mangame, Bunda MPS roadblock, 15 February 2007.
- 18 Interview with Inspector Noel Kayira, projects officer, Community Policing Services Branch, headquarters, MPS, Lilongwe, 21 February 2007.
- 19 Interviews with MRA and Department of Immigration officials, Dedza, Biriwiri, and Mwanza border crossings, February 2007.
- 20 Interview with operations manager, transport company, Lilongwe, 22 February 2007.
- 21 Interview with Inspector Noel Kayira, projects officer, Community Policing Services Branch, headquarters, MPS, Lilongwe, 21 February 2007.
- 22 Interview with Inspector Noel Kayira, projects officer, Community Policing Services Branch, headquarters, MPS, Lilongwe, 21 February 2007.
- 23 Interview with Philip Chamveka, Glens Malawi Clearing Agents, Dedza, 15 February 2007.
- 24 Interview with managing director of large clearing agents, Lilongwe, 22 February 2007.
- 25 Interview with managing director of large clearing agents, Lilongwe, 22 February 2007.
- 26 Interview with Philip Chamveka, Glens Malawi Clearing Agents, Dedza, 15 February 2007.
- 27 Interview with Philip Chamveka, Glens Malawi Clearing Agents, Dedza, 15 February 2007.
- 28 Interviews with MRA and Mozambican customs officials, Dedza and Calómué, respectively, 15 February 2007.
- 29 Interview with Sub-inspector Patrick Muyla, MPS, Dedza roadblock, 15 February 2007.
- 30 Statistics Office, MPS, Dedza district, February 2007.
- 31 Interview with Inspector Oliver Khofi, Criminal Investigation Department (CID), MPS, Dedza, 15 February 2007.
- 32 Interview with Sub-inspector E. W. B. Magalasi, CID, Mwanza MPS, 17 February 2007.
- 33 Interview with Sub-inspector E. W. B. Magalasi, CID, Mwanza MPS, 17 February 2007.
- 34 Interview with Sub-inspector E. W. B. Magalasi, CID, Mwanza MPS, 17 February 2007; interview with Sub-inspector Flemings, MPS, Mwanza border crossing, 17 February 2007.
- 35 Interview with M. Makwenda, MRA, Biriwiri, 16 February 2007.
- 36 Interview with Sub-inspector Jackson Majika, MPS, Biriwiri, 16 February 2007.
- 37 Interview with Inspector Noel Kayira, projects officer, Community Policing Services Branch, headquarters, MPS, Lilongwe, 21 February 2007.
- 38 Interview with officials from Zambia Wildlife Authority, Lusaka, August 2003.
- 39 Interview with Stanford Nyirongo, game ranger, Lengwe National Park, 18 February 2007.
- 40 At the time of writing, the National Statistical Office in Zomba had no record of bilateral trade at Mulanje for 2006.
- 41 Small Arms Survey seminar on illegal firearms prevalence in Africa, Accra, October 2003.

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