March has been recovered. The seizure by equipment lost during these attacks is a noteworthy exception.

50 assault rifles, machine guns (including 8 round of ammunition)

Western Sahara

Round of ammunition

Obfuscation in reporting and problematic record-keeping

A tendency to obfuscation and imprecise use of terminology obscures the value of reporting. ‘Ambush’ is often used as a catch-all term, to the extent that it has lost any specific meaning. For example, in the course of its research the Survey found that ‘ambush’ has been used to describe an instance in which peacekeepers are accosted and asked to give up their weapons by a small and lightly armed foe with no tactical advantage. The same term is used to describe a large attacking force of heavily armed men on horseback and with vehicles fitted with machine guns—sometimes enjoying the advantage of higher ground. Furthermore, in the absence of greater detail, the word ‘vehicle’ can be used to minimize or understate the significance or existence of the materiel lost. Many non-armoured commercial vehicles serve as troop escorts or ‘technicals’ and are armed with medium or heavy machine guns, but specifics on such losses are seldom offered.

Imperfect reporting and record-keeping are another contributing factor. There is a noticeable and understandable reluctance to share bad news. Communication is sometimes made more difficult when peacekeepers are tasked with filing reports in a language that is not their mother tongue, which can reduce useful detail and nuance. A shortage of computers and telecommunications equipment in the AU Mission in the Sudan (AMIS) made it harder for the AU to be kept informed of incidents of diversion.

Oversight of recovered weapons a ‘grey area’

Peacekeepers’ record-keeping and oversight of weapons recovered are also considered problematic. The recording of materiel recovered during formal and mandated disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) exercises is usually fairly rigorous (even if not particularly effective in terms of weapons tracking). Yet there is often little record-keeping or oversight of weaponry recovered outside DDR programmes. The handling of weapons recovered in cordon and search operations, engagements with hostile forces, or raids on arms caches, is often conducted ad hoc. Some items are returned to the armed group from which they were taken, some are redistributed to local authorities, while others may be destroyed or retained for weapon-keeping. (This laissez-faire approach is apparently not limited to peace operations covered in the study.) In this respect, the UN Security Council’s recent reaffirmation of the mandate of the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) to destroy the arms and ammunition it confiscates is an important development.

Conclusion

This Research Note and the study on which it is based do not seek to exaggerate the scale of the diversion of arms and ammunition during peace operations. The Survey is aware of the political sensitivities and calculations involved in fielding peace operations, and has sought to be conservative in its estimates and transparent in its methodology. The research does not suggest that diversion from peacekeeping operations presents a vast challenge or that it is more important than addressing other ways in which armed groups obtain materiel. While it is impossible to make a precise estimate