

Small arms in Somaliland:

Local control could be a first step

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The issue of small arms¹ is receiving growing attention world-wide. The example of the Republic of Somaliland demonstrates the complexity of the issue. At the same time, it raises questions about the efficiency of current approaches to the reduction of small arms-related problems. These efforts concentrate on weapons collection and limitations on the weapons trade. This article is based on the results of field research conducted in 1998.²

Today's proliferation of small arms in Somaliland resulted mainly from the war which led to the collapse of Somalia's central government and Somaliland's subsequent declaration of independence in 1991.

From the middle of the 1980s on, the Somali National Movement (SNM) mobilised militias against the army of Somalia's dictator, Siad Barre.³ In the course of the war, militias and civilians looted the weapon stores of the Somali National Army. After their victory, former combatants returned to their families and took their weapons with them. Several hundred thousand small arms of different types, mostly firearms, are believed to be diffused among the inhabitants of Somaliland today. The great majority of these weapons are different types of Kalashnikov rifles (AK-47, AK-74, AKM), made in the former Soviet Union and in Eastern Germany. The Soviets massively armed Somalia until 1978, but the list of other arms suppliers is long and includes many Western countries. For example, (West-)German G3-rifles from Heckler and Koch are often seen in Somaliland. The United States also began to supply weapons to Somalia after the Soviet Union decided to support Ethiopia in the Ogaden war.⁴

'Normality' after the war

Today, arms are part of everyday life in Somaliland. It is estimated that 70 per cent of adult men in the country possess at

least one firearm. In those parts of the country under the control of the Somaliland 'government', armed people do not carry weapons openly. A police force is under construction and is struggling for acceptance by the population. So far its only achievement is that people now carry smaller, concealable weapons. However, most people leave their arms at home, not only as a result of the threat of punishment by the police, but also as a consequence of the country's improved internal security.

In Sool and Sanaag, two eastern areas of Somaliland bordering Somalia, the situation is different. These areas are not under the control of the government in Somaliland's capital, Hargeisa. The police force that exists here is merely a formality and practically meaningless.

In these areas, weapons are visibly seen on the street. Public matters are run by the clan elders whose responsibilities include political representation, decision-making for the various clan segments, as well as advising clan members and solving conflicts among them. Elders also run a system of justice according to the traditional *xeer*⁵ penal code. Some of the elders indicated in interviews that they would like to prohibit people from carrying weapons in the streets. However, they felt that their authority would not be able to achieve this.

The problem with small arms

Small arms no longer determine the social dynamics of Somaliland. From time to time, personal conflicts or local politics are carried out with the gun, but the number of these incidents do not seem to be significant. This is difficult to assess because of the general lack of statistics in Somaliland and the resulting difficulties in making comparisons. The police commanders in Somaliland argue that these events are 'normal crime', and that their numbers are much lower than in Western Europe or elsewhere.

The small arms problem has to be seen on a different level: small arms clearly represent potential future armed conflicts. The fighting which has taken place between different factions in Somaliland since 1991 illustrates that this is a real danger.⁶ Armed roadblocks and robbery, which were very common until just a few years ago, also show potential problems resulting from small arms proliferation.

The social costs of past fighting can still be seen in hospitals and projects for physical and psychological rehabilitation. The high number of amputations as a result of bullet wounds are particularly noticeable.

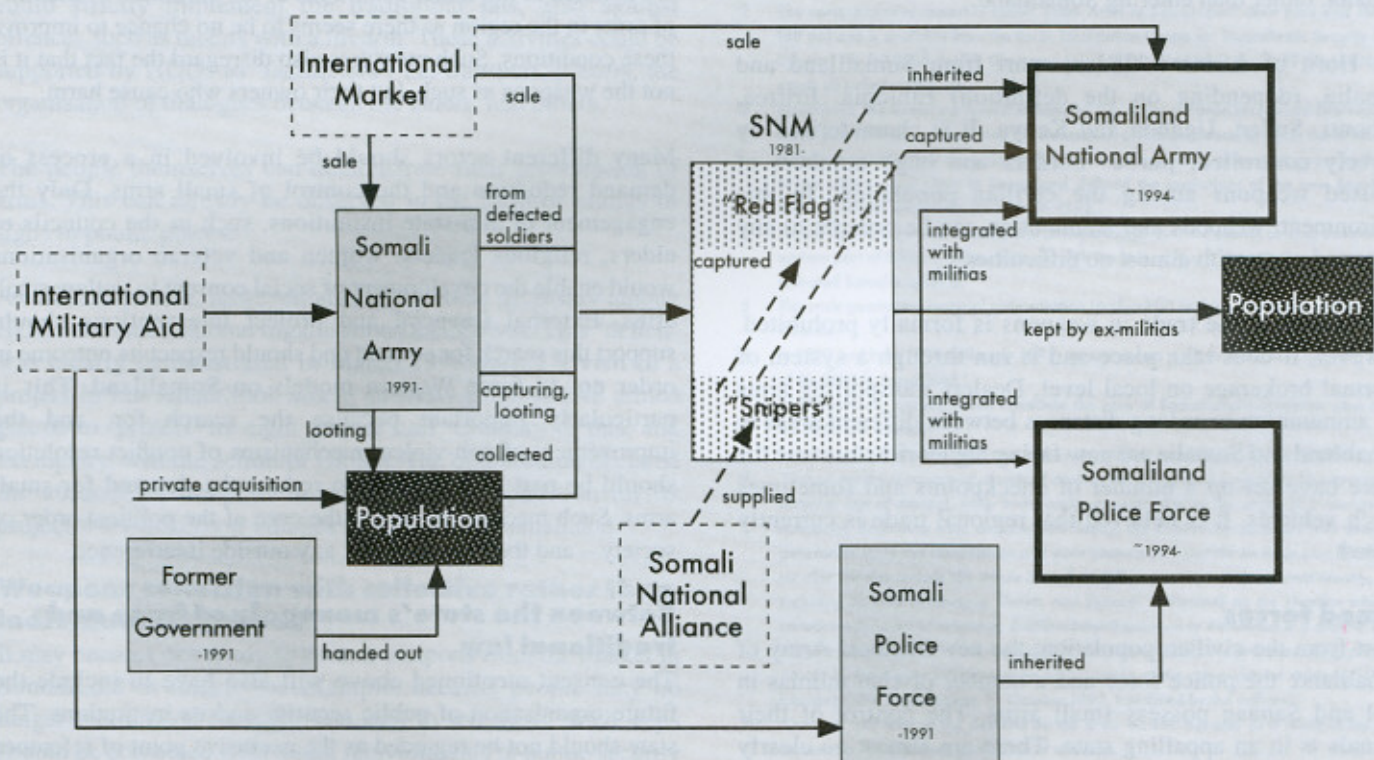
Apart from the deliberate use of firearms, many household accidents also occur. If weapons are not stored and secured properly, children may play with them and injure themselves or their relatives.

The demand for small arms

The question remains why most people in Somaliland keep their weapons although the Somali war ended eight years ago and the last conflict in Somaliland ended three years ago. A Kalashnikov rifle's market value is currently about US \$200⁷ – reason enough to sell it once there is no longer a need for it. Several other reasons exist:

- The people do not yet trust public security enough to give up the option of self-protection, neither in government-held areas, nor in Sool and Sanaag. In the words of a clan elder: *"Everybody is his own policeman."*⁸ Decades of intermittent fighting, often turning allies into military opponents, have also contributed to the desire for self-protection.
- The lack of public security structures and a partial loss of non-violent social mechanisms for conflict resolution go hand-in-hand. Since Somaliland's independence, 'politics' has to regain the population's trust and nominally democratic structures have to be established at least. The system of traditional rule within the clan structures has also been weakened. Now that the political domination of the clans by the militias is decreasing, the elders are regaining importance.
- Security has been a private rather than a public good in Somali society for a long time. This is due to many factors of which the economy is one. Pastoralists and nomads with their herds live in remote areas far away from urban centres and roads that are patrolled by the police. They have replaced their simple weapons meant for self-protection, such as spears, with modern firearms. It is difficult to imagine a reversal of this process. Regarding security, the clan as a social structure (by tendency) means a bottom-up organisation, from the smallest elements of society (individuals and families) up to the clan as a whole. Security,

MAJOR ARMS FLOWS IN SOMALILAND SINCE THE EARLY 1980S*



* Apart from the flows indicated here, [private trade of weapons has taken place at all stages of the conflict.

according to needs, is organised around the lowest common denominator. This creates a serious hurdle for voluntary disarmament and the development of reliance on collective security structures.⁹

- A 'culture of arms' has developed in which arms have become status symbols for men.

The economic reasons for the possession of weapons are no longer as important as before. During the early years of Somaliland's independence, weapons not only made it possible to conduct robbery, but also allowed people to work as armed guards for international organisations and foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Furthermore, a weapon was the equivalent of an entry ticket for demobilisation programmes and low military pensions.

Weapons trade

With regard to small arms, people in Somaliland seem to be in a 'wait and see' state of mind. This is confirmed by the small arms market. The price of US \$200 for a Kalashnikov rifle is relatively high (in Somali terms). Apart from the views of several insiders who were interviewed, this is a clear indication that the market in Somaliland is not flooded with huge numbers of weapons. Because of the possibility of massive supplies from the outside, this would rapidly become the case if an acute conflict erupted. At the same time, the demand for small arms is not high enough to let prices rise far above their real value. It also indicates that the market is quite saturated. Altogether, there is very little market activity in the country. Weapons are flowing to neighbouring conflict areas, such as southern Somalia, rather than entering Somaliland.

The Horn of Africa includes, apart from Somaliland and Somalia, (depending on the definition) Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan, Uganda and Kenya. It is characterised by scarcely controlled, porous borders and huge numbers of diffused weapons among the civilian population. In this environment, weapons and ammunition can be brought to any interested party with almost no difficulties.

In Somaliland, the trade in weapons is formally prohibited. However, it does take place and is run through a system of informal brokerage on local level. Dealers transporting arms and ammunition over long distances between different areas in Somaliland and Somalia are now facing higher risks because the police have set up a number of checkpoints and sometimes search vehicles. It is believed that regional trade is currently limited.

Armed forces

Apart from the civilian population, the new National Army of Somaliland, the police force and a number of clan militias in Sool and Sanaag possess small arms. The control of their arsenals is in an appalling state. There are almost no clearly defined and practiced rules for the registration, handling and distribution of weapons and ammunition. These units can



Somali children gather around a gunman during a peace rally in Southern Somalia.

therefore easily become sources of weapons and ammunition for the black market. This has already been reported in one case.

Demand reduction

An approach that focuses on the reduction of the demand¹⁰ for small arms is clearly necessary. At the same time, sanctions on the possession, carrying, trade and use of these weapons should be instituted. Such a strategy aims to change the attitudes and behaviour of arms owners and society as a whole. Only as a second step should weapons be collected from people, once these are considered to be 'superfluous'. Efforts that aim at the collection of weapons through material incentives or pressure are doomed to fail under conditions of the unlimited availability of arms in the region as there seems to be no chance to improve these conditions. Such measures also disregard the fact that it is not the weapons as such, but their owners who cause harm.

Many different actors should be involved in a process of demand reduction and the control of small arms. Only the engagement of non-state institutions, such as the councils of elders, religious leaders, women and veteran organisations would enable the development of social consent to outlaw small arms. External financial and project interventions should support this search for consent and should respect its outcome in order not to force Western models on Somaliland. This is particularly important because the search for, and the improvement of non-violent mechanisms of conflict resolution should be part of a strategy to reduce the demand for small arms. Such mechanisms are at the core of the political order of society – and therefore prohibit any outside interference.

Between the state's monopoly of force and traditional law

The consent mentioned above will also have to include the future organisation of public security and its institutions. The state should not be regarded as the exclusive point of reference here, because both the police and national legislation, as well as the elders and the *xeer*-law are pillars of public security in

Somaliland's society. This combination could be, or could become a model of social organisation that incorporates security as a public good provided by the state (from the top down) and participatory, socially produced security from the bottom up.

Trust is good, control is better

On the one hand, the establishment and improvement of controls over small arms should be 'owned' by society itself in a similar way as the reduction of the demand for these weapons should be. On the other hand, external actors can set up their own activities on a much broader scale without running risks regarding their legitimacy.

As a necessary precondition for any actors to play a role in the control of small arms, their own 'handling' of small arms has to be exemplary. The clear, transparent and strict management of weapons and ammunition of the police, but also of the army and militia forces, is necessary for control to be credible.

The commanders of the police force reported that they would like to implement the existing laws which prohibit the unlicensed ownership and trade of weapons. But their force is not well equipped, lacking the means for transport and communication. Furthermore, the police is poorly trained, if at all. This could be an opportunity for external actors to become involved.

The elders could be motivated to expand their authority regarding the control of weapons. They could raise the consciousness of the people through public speeches. They could strictly implement the traditional law, also against offences such as threats with a firearm. These activities could be supported by NGOs as 'facilitators', i.e. transport, posters, the organisation of dialogues between the elders, and others.


The people themselves can demonstrate their proscription of arms. This can already be observed in the form of murals or signs in public places.

Awareness-raising, however, also seems to be necessary among NGOs and international organisations themselves. This 'deficit' was clearly demonstrated in March 1998 during a visit to a project in Las Anod/Sool, where an NGO employed 48 armed guards to 'protect' its eight project staff. Contrary to this, and exemplary, was the action of Oxfam. The organisation declared the absence of weapons in public as a precondition for its project work in several villages in the west of Somaliland.

Weapons collection with collective rather than individual incentives

It may become necessary to collect weapons from the market in Somaliland in future, for example, because people may no longer feel a need for them and start to sell them. Such steps should be combined with direct reinvestments in public security and social and economic development in these particular places. Instead of buying back weapons or trying to demobilise 'self-

demobees', public announcements such as the following could be made: if a specified number of weapons are voluntarily turned in within a specific and short period of time, cars will be given to the local police. If an even higher number of weapons are turned in, a school will be reconstructed and the teachers will be paid for an interim period. Such efforts would have to be combined with measures to reintegrate unemployed former militias.¹¹ The weapons collected during such a process should be destroyed in a public ceremony.

So far, campaigns and public events concerning small arms in the north focus very much on the supply side, i.e. limitations on the export of small arms to conflict areas. Even if this might make it more difficult for recipients to purchase their weapons, it would possibly only make a difference to the people of the Horn of Africa in twenty to thirty years, if at all. Most of the large quantities of weapons in these countries were acquired during the 1970s and will continue to be effective for a long time if social and state controls over these arms are not improved in the region itself. Supply-oriented campaigns therefore have to be combined with demand approaches if these are to be effective and not merely meant for moral self-satisfaction. 

Notes

- There is no generally recognised definition of the term 'small arms'. A pragmatic definition is used that follows the main military features of small arms. These weapons can be carried by individuals without further means of transport. This includes pistols, rifles, machineguns, mortars, grenades, anti-tank weapons and portable surface-to-air missiles. Even landmines belong to this definition, but are excluded from this research, because they already receive significant attention in the media and politics. This research focused on pistols, rifles and machineguns.
- The comprehensive report is called *Small Arms in Somaliland: Their Role and Diffusion* (68 pp) and is available from the Berlin Information Centre for Transatlantic Security (BITS), Rykestr. 13, D-10405 Berlin, Germany; Tel: +49-30-4468580, Fax: +49-30-4410221, or email: ulf.felind@bits.de.
- Somaliland, the former north-west of Somalia, has so far not been recognised internationally. Three years of civil war preceded the declaration of independence, in which the SNM fought mainly on behalf of the Isaaq clan against the Somali government army. A peace conference of the elders of all clans in Somaliland defined the institutions of the new Republic of Somaliland and elected the president in 1993.
- During the Ogaden war, Somalia and Ethiopia fought over the control of what constitutes the eastern part of Ethiopia today. Ethiopia, with the help of Russia, Eastern Germany and Cuba defeated Somalia in 1978.
- This code guarantees material compensation (preferably) or 'blood revenge' to the victims of violence.
- In 1992 and from 1994 until early 1996, several armed conflicts took place between factions of the SNM in Somaliland.
- In comparison: camels, which constitute the core of Somaliland's economy, cost around US \$250 per animal.
- Interview with Garaad Abshir, one of the elders of Las Anod/Sool, 24 March 1998.
- "Somali society is composed of units of kinship. The principle of assignment (to a group) is the paternal line of descent, while every male ancestor may be the origin of a new group of solidarity. Beginning from an extended family, the community enlarges with every past generation, up to the clans (of ten and more generations) and the six huge clan families. The six clan families include the whole Somali people, regardless of its national identity, hence including Somalis in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. It depends on the situation which unit constitutes the point of reference. Brothers keep themselves to themselves in a dispute, cousins drag in their brothers - the more distant the relationship between quarrelling people or groups is, the bigger will the unit be which serves as the community of solidarity" (Kathrin Eikenberg, *Die Tageszeitung*, 13 October 1993, translated by the authors).
- 'Demand' not only as the demand on the arms market, but also as a result of the above reasons for the continued possession of weapons.
- A similar approach is currently under development by the UNDP in Gramsh, Albania. See Van der Graaf, H. J., *Weapons for development*, Tirana, 4 September 1998, <www.precam.org/>.