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Small arms in Southern Africa

By Enough Sishi

Southern Africa is awash with small and light weapons. Most of these weapons are the material legacy of the Cold War. During 1970s, '80s and '90s the superpowers pumped massive amounts of guns and ammunition into this region. Many of these now are controlled by bandits in Mozambique or unemployed demobilized soldiers and black market syndicates in Angola.

These weapons were issued as government grants during the Cold War. The Soviets supported Marxist movements and regimes, while the U.S. supplied pro-capitalists with weapons. The intelligence organizations of the superpowers (CIA and KGB) facilitated this.

Angola

Since Angola got independence in 1975 from Portugal a bloody civil war has dragged on. Throughout this conflict the U.S. pumped millions worth of weapons to the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and its military component, the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) through its military assistance program. U.S. military aid increased from \$15 million in 1986 to \$300 million in 1992, the year aid it was suspended. China was another military supplier of the FNLA. South Africa's capability of supplying weapons to Unita was boosted by its internal industry, pumping more than \$80 million of military aid to UNITA throughout the war until the early '90s.

Russia is said to have supplied most of the military aid through KGB routes to Angola's Marxist-aligned government, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). Available figures state about \$2 billion of weapons annually was received from the Soviets, while Cuba supplied \$200 million of Soviet arms.

Open military government grants were complemented by covert deliveries, for which statistics were never opened to public scrutiny. It is known that between 1975-76 the CIA secretly supplied anti-Communist insurgents in Angola with mortars, anti-tank rockets, rifles, ammunition and communication equipment. On top of this supply the MPLA and UNITA spent huge amounts on other weapons, with MPLA running a debt of \$4 billion.

Mozambique

The superpowers waged the Cold War through proxies, and one such conflict was the Mozambican civil war that broke out in 1975. The Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) controlled the government and received military support from USSR, while the Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) rallied support from anti-communist states. Throughout the 16-year war the FRELIMO government supplied an estimated 1.5 million assault rifles to civilians who supported their cause.

The war ended in 1992, followed by United Nations-sponsored demobilization and disarmament. Unfortunately, the United Nations operation did not destroy the weapons after demobilization. These arsenals were open to corruption and mismanagement after the U.N. had left and some 6 million AK47s are still at large. Up until 1998 South African and Mozambique police continued to recover abandoned arms caches on the borders and inside Mozambique.

Other South African Region Countries

Some other countries survived this massive pump of weapons because of

their internal political dynamics. Swaziland, for example, is a stable mountain kingdom that experienced little conflict throughout the Cold War and had little need for arms. However, it was an arms smuggling transit point from the rest of the region to South Africa until 1993 and many weapons ended in Swaziland without moving on to intended destinations.

Botswana is another country that does not have a big firearms problem; most guns there are licensed and strictly regulated, though some are stolen from legal owners. However, during the apartheid era, arms smuggled from African National Congress (ANC) camps in Zambia went to Zimbabwe and through Botswana to South Africa. It is this use of Botswana for transit that created the firearms problems.

Zambia's problem of weapons came from harboring liberation movements such as the ANC inside its borders. Arms from superpowers intended for left liberation movements landed by plane in Zambia and were smuggled through Swaziland or Botswana to South Africa. Even though Zambia authorities claimed to be in control of this influx of weapons, the easy availability of weapons in that country have proved otherwise.

During its struggle for independence, Namibia, on the other hand, was a scene of tense battles between the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) and the South African Defence Force (SADF). Independence calmed the situation. Demobilization and disarmament through the United Nations were successful. The main problem for Namibia is its proximity with Angola, which uses it as a transit point for arms smugglers.

The Black Market

The end of the Cold War has dramatically reduced military support in the region, but the weapons themselves have remained and have led to the growth of the black market. In Mozambique, for instance, stockpiles of weapons that were seized during the U.N. disarmament were never destroyed. When the U.N. mission left, corrupt officials sold these arsenals.

In Angola, despite the U.N.-instituted arms embargo, UNITA has been able to acquire weapons, allowing the international arms dealers to cash in. Angolans themselves, who are poor and hungry because of decades of war, have been accused by Zambians of illegally crossing the border to Zambia and exchanging their weapons for food. An alliance has emerged between criminal organizations, insurgent groups and ex-soldiers who still retain their weapons of war and who are allegedly engaged in multi-million rand robberies in South Africa. These groups sell guns to each other and exchange other favors. In most Southern African countries wars have brought the economy to its knees. The demobilized soldiers lack job opportunities, so weapons have become their only means of survival. Non-state actors, including criminals, engaging in acts of violence without access to legal arms, create a big demand for light weapons.

Violence is so deeply entrenched that it is viewed as "part of life." The social acceptance of violence as part and parcel of human relations creates a "culture of violence." Michael Klare argues that global interdependence, mass media, and influence of international organizations are shifting power away from nation states toward powerful international forces, thereby creating anxiety and insecurity among ethnic groups. Modernization, the creation of a global village, was supposed to erode these identities, but instead has created anxiety among individuals, who turn to ethnic identities for support. Modernization has also created new ethnic elites who can provide leadership to their groups. Rootless individuals whose groups occupy unequal social classes are vulnerable to ascriptive mobilization and antagonisms that can burst into conflict.

South Africa: Identity, violence And Small Arms

Together, small arms and identity played a big role in the violence of South Africa. One of the most important institutions in forming a link between identity and violence is the army -- in this case, both the SADF and the Mkhonto Wesizwe [M.K., the military wing of the ANC, based in Zambia until it was unbanned in South Africa] fostered insensitivity, aggressiveness and violence. Armed struggle by M.K. and the counter-insurgency measures by the SADF were identity-based violence. The ideologies that drove the different sides of soldier-identities in South Africa legitimized violence as means of obtaining and maintaining power. The slogan of the anti-apartheid movement, Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), "one settler, one bullet," is examples of violent indoctrination forming the soldier-identities of the resistance-apartheid era.

Like the rest of the region, Russia, China and Cuba backed the liberation movements with military equipment -- especially small arms, which were smuggled into South Africa by ANC operatives. Arms caches were created inside the country. General Bantu Holomisa opened up what was then a small bantustan, Transkei, to liberation movements as a base for launching operations. Large amounts of weaponry entered Transkei. To counter these developments and further the strategy of "divide and rule" the National Party trained and equipped the paramilitary force of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), a South African political organization headed by Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, whose strength came from manipulating the anxieties of the Zulu ethnic group.

In 1983 the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed as a mouthpiece of the ANC while it was still banned. The relationship between the UDF and IFP immediately soured, mainly because the UDF challenged the IFP over the monopoly of African politics, especially in KwaZulu-Natal province, and because of the close relationship between the IFP and the ruling National Party, which had created apartheid. The National Party relied on the IFP to oppose UDF because there was no significant Afrikaner population in KwaZulu Natal. (The Afrikaners, or Boers, generally were the strongest supporters of apartheid.) For their part, the IFP saw the alliance as a way of gaining political control of KwaZulu Natal.

The conflict escalated into violent outbursts, ambushes, and attacks between the IFP and UDF, culminating in the formation of IFP-aligned Self Protection Units and ANC-aligned Self Defence Units. From 1987 to 1990, an estimated 4 000 people died in KwaZulu Natal. Political identity became the dividing line in the conflict.

Lieutenant-General Rinus Jansen van Rensburg, SANDF Surgeon-General, said the project would provide vital research into anti-retroviral and non anti-retroviral drugs, as well as a scientific research basis allowing better informed decisions to be made in supporting SANDF soldiers and their families who are HIV-positive.

In the 1990s violence took another turn. The ban was lifted on the ANC in 1990 and immediately it won the support of the majority of blacks. Facing such strong opposition, Buthelezi introduced a new strategy, mobilizing the Zulu nation around ethnic consciousness. His IFP boycotted the elections, demanding clarity on the status of the Kingdom of KwaZulu in the new dispensation. Buthelezi even went so far as to draw on the support of King Goodwill Zwelithini of the Zulu Kingdom to win the support of the Zulus. This meant elections were preceded by deadly violence. Violence claimed 3000 lives in East Rand alone between 1990 and 1994. A different form of identity was taking a center stage in the conflict. Manipulation of ethnic identities became the electioneering strategy for the IFP. Finally the IFP was taken aboard the election process through a last minute promise to consider their worry about the Zulu Kingdom after the election. The success of the 1994 election has dramatically reduced

violence.

However, after the election, disarmament strategies were not successful at all. In October 1994 a disarmament operation called "Rollerball" was started. It was a disaster. Four months later, the weapons seized by this operation consisted of only 70 AK47s, 93 hand grenades, 53 pistols, 316 limpet mines. This figure is nothing compared with quantities that had been supplied to IFP by the National Party and by the superpowers to the ANC.

The second major source is the internal armament industry. During the violent '80s and sensitive transitional stage the white population armed themselves alarmingly with legal firearms. By the early 1990s they were well armed but this acquisition of legal firearms continues and theft is still a major problem; there are still 2700 reports of stolen firearms every month.

With this background in mind, the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa has developed its Small Arms Program to study the illegal trade in small arms in Southern Africa. It will demonstrate the linkages between an increased availability of small arms and the emergence of a culture of violence in transit and end-user countries. The program's field research will include mapping of supply, transit, and end user points, research and writing, dissemination and recommendations on the licensing, and destruction of surplus weapons.