

# Small arms proliferation in northern kenya history essay



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The single most serious security challenge facing the world and Kenya in particular today is the proliferation and circulation of illicit small arms and light weapons. By virtue of their easy availability, relative cheapness, technical simplicity and obscurity, these weapons have become arms of choice to all categories of criminals. Within the context of our region, they are the weapons of choice for cattle rustlers, carjackers, terrorists, pirates and insurgents focused on undermining legitimate governments.

According to The UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (PoA), the proliferation of small arms can be attributed to hindering development, undermining human rights and restrict good government across the world.

Small arms proliferation within the pastoralist communities has sustained violent conflicts, contributed to rising levels of armed crime and undermined broad-based and equitable development in Northern Kenya. The long history of internal and regional armed conflicts in Kenya some of which are on-

going, the tendency in Somalia towards undemocratic political and security systems, weak neighbouring governments capacity and underdevelopment have all posed significant challenges to efforts to establish effective controls on small arms in the Northern Kenya region.

Efforts have been initiated by the Government of Kenya to curb further proliferation of small arms and disarming the illegal owners of the said arms. With these kind of determination, this study seeks to find out what contributes and encourages small arms proliferation in Northern Kenya.

## **Small Arms Proliferation in Northern Kenya**

Communities in Northern Kenya have for long possessed illegal SALW as a way of checking on cattle rustling. Although illegal, communities have continued to possess such arms even at the danger of being subdued by forceful government disarmament programs. Currently, the illegal arms' market seems to be taking a new dimension with new market fronts being opened up in North Rift and a renewed demand from unfamiliar buyers joining the market (Masinde, Pkalya, & Adan, 2004). The proliferation of small arms and light weapons in this region is an immediate security challenge to individuals, societies, and neighbouring countries hence causing an enormous hurdle to sustainable security and development (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2001).

In Kenya, the pastoralist communities occupy the largest percentage (over 70%) of the country's total land area. The population of the livestock keeping (pastoralist) communities in Kenya is estimated at about 20% of the total population of the country. The Northern Kenyan pastoralists are nomadic

ethnic groups that are highly mobile. These are mainly Turkana, Samburu, Pokot, Borana, Rendille, Orma and Somali clans. They move from one area to another in search of pasture and water for their livestock. These movements are one of the major sources of misunderstanding and conflict between them and their neighbours (Waqo, 2003).

The region is highly marginalised and underdeveloped as essential infrastructure such as water, livestock market, health, roads and education facilities are either too scarce or totally absent to be relied on. The vastness and remoteness of the area, inadequate road networks and scarcity of resources goes hand-in-hand with lapse in security occasioning frequent misunderstanding and conflicts among these pastoralist communities. This is normally over resources especially water and grazing land. A research by (Government of Kenya, 2006) suggests that the high presence of small arms within the North Eastern province is perhaps a reflection of the use of small arms in stock rustling and in settling local disputes, proximity to the borders with Ethiopia and Somalia, and the actual or perceived failure of the State to provide adequate security for civilians living in these areas.

The pastoral communities in northern Kenya in particular, possess artillery that might pose unprecedented security problems to the nation. Some security experts have cautioned that these communities are on the verge of forming militia and war groups, which could even be pulled into future political face-offs. The experts warn the weapons could be used on large scale if quick measures are not taken to disarm communities (Kiarie & Kiberenge, 2009)

The possession and use of small arms is not limited to these border provinces, however, as the results for Central, Nairobi and Western provinces indicate. These regions have a greater concentration of urban communities. Therefore, the results suggest that, given the different security threats, and social and economic conditions in rural and urban areas, the demand and use of small arms is driven by a variety of factors.

### **Factors Contributing To Arms Proliferation**

Small arms and light weapons proliferation has made traditional raiding a commercial venture, more deadly and severe. Small arms including automatic and semi automatic weapons have become widely available and are increasingly used in the pastoralist's districts. These weapons have come from a variety of sources, including conflict prone neighbouring countries (Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Northern Uganda). Each community is trying to arm itself creating a local " arms races" (Rugumamu, 2004).

There is inadequate policing of Pastoralists areas as both the national and district police and security forces are either unable or unwilling to confront cattle rustlers who have more often than not struck with impunity. State's obligation and duty to provide security to her citizens is conspicuously under siege in northern Kenya. This has greatly contributed to the spiralling gun culture, self-defence and retaliation missions. The state arming of local vigilante groups, popularly known as Home Guards, in response to security problems, has exacerbated the cattle rustling conflict rather than ease the situation and Legal state arms issued to these groups have been used in criminal activities including cattle raiding (Mwaniki, Mbuchi, Leleruk, & Mwei, 2007).

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Close examination of the demand for arms reveals a complex interplay of environmental, cultural, historical and governance issues. Remoteness and environmental scarcity have contributed to the difficulties of pastoral peoples and their dependence upon a mobile, cattle-rearing lifestyle and to marginalization, underdevelopment and insecurity. In former times, pastoralists had coping mechanisms for times of extreme scarcity, which included mobility into other areas, alliances and agreements with other groups, and raiding. Raiding was usually small-scale and did not involve modern weapons, and cattle circulated between groups in the area. However, colonial and postcolonial governments have gazetted large tracts of pastoral land such that pastoralists compete for increasingly small areas of pasture and scarce sources of water (Buchanan-Smith & Lind, 2005).

Pastoralist internal political organization promotes bravery and, if necessary, violence - for example, for the ascension of young men through the age-set system from shepherd boys to warriors. Bride wealth is another major factor with prices ranging from 20 heads of cattle. High prices are maintained partly by the need to replenish cattle lost to raiding. In the past when pastoral societies were more prosperous, parents would provide the cattle for their sons when they marry, but now young men need to arm themselves and raid. The people have come to depend on it as their source of livelihood. The introduction of arms into the pastoral areas has allowed influential businessmen or elders to gain control of the cattle raiding equation, sell cattle out of the district and thus impoverish the region. Arms are then necessary to enable one to have a livelihood working for a racketeer.

Marginalization and insecurity

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District officers surveyed in Kenya stated that pastoralists mainly demand arms for protection of animals and people from attacks by neighbouring groups. The local community members have mentioned the inability of the government to adequately protect the people, in a situation of porous international borders through which small arms are flowing, such that there is a localized inter-communal arms race. Pastoral areas have historically been the victims of marginalization (political, economic and social isolation), with the absence of effective governance or, in some places, with the total absence of government and judicial systems. Colonial governments often appeared to be seeking not just to end cattle raiding but pastoralism itself, on the grounds that it was a backward way of life. This contributed to a process of growing arms race. Militaristic approaches by the state like forced disarmament stimulate an arms trade among the local communities because the bullets and arms increase in value, encouraging other communities to trade their arms.

## **Effect of Small Arms on Communities**

There are various effects that the proliferation of arms in the northern Kenya communities experience. Due to possession of arms there's a rampant ethnic conflict between tribes or clans. Cattle rustling and the rest as listed below:

Destruction of property.

Rising poverty levels among the communities of Northern Kenya.

Increased insecurity levels.

Consistent banditry.

Increased crime levels.

Sophistication of conflicts and crime incidences

Attracted many businessmen in to commercial trading and deals in arms.

Kept off investors from the region - affected tourism and livestock marketing businesses.

Disruption of social harmony and co-existence among the ethnic groups.

Constant fear and feeling of vulnerability is instilled in the communities.

Destruction of infrastructure / facilities such as schools, health centres, roads, water holes and markets.

It's for these consequences that it's important the State and other involved stakeholders should take immediate action to control arms proliferation in the region. Kenya has been at the forefront of efforts to, prevent and resolve conflict in the sub-region and in particular to tackle the proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons. For example ratifying the Nairobi Protocol and also host the Regional Centre on Small Arms (RECSA), which co-ordinates and oversees the implementation of the Nairobi Protocol.

### **Action to Reduce the Proliferation**

According to an Oxfam worker who is part of the peace negotiation programme was quoted " Because of pasture and water, livestock and the boundaries just bring about the conflicts. That is why people possess guns

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for self-defence. When the government became independent, there was not enough security around and by that time is when the conflicts started. So the only way for people to safeguard themselves was to buy arms from the neighbouring countries like Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia. For some people, comparing to different areas even in the west, they talk about how there is hardly any government presence and so they feel they must arm themselves in protection against other warring communities. The government tries to disarm them but they still continue possessing [guns]. Like in West Pokot and Turkana districts, when the neighbouring countries attack us, the government always takes long to react. So we do not wait for their defence”.

To combat the demand for small arms, Oxfam’s peace programme visits border areas to form village-level peace and reconciliation committees, many of them across the international borders. This work is partially funded by Oxfam. Major obstacles include finding transportation to travel to remote areas: but according to the staff, villagers are receptive to peace-building education. Oxfam GB peace-building activities address strengthening community capacity to manage peace and resolve conflicts through application of traditional and environmentally relevant mechanisms; and enhance state capacity to manage security and ensure the rule of law for safety of its citizens (Waqo, 2003).

This entails support to community dialogue and disputes management activities, support trainings for community members and government officers, research and documentation. The community peace-building initiatives are supported through district peace and conflict resolution committees whose membership is drawn from all the stakeholder institutions

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in the district. The government and all the ethnic groups are part of the committee in a given district. As a matter of taming the communities and encouraging them to do away with illegal arms, the government supports the community peace-building initiative and plays a major role in strengthening it. Within the community initiatives for peace-building is weapons collection and voluntary surrender activities. The role of peace initiatives in collection of weapons has varied across the arid districts. Emphasis has been on confiscating those weapons, which have been used in murder, banditry, stock theft or intimidation of other pastoralists (Nnoli, 1998). Most guns collected are in response to such incidents. Where possible the aim has been to avoid use of force in collecting these weapons. In Wajir, for example, elders from the peace committee take the lead in efforts to collect guns. Security personnel often accompany them but only threaten force if elders advise this. Elders speak to the household concerned and inform them they will not be jailed if they return the gun. A de facto amnesty has existed in many arid districts; those who are relieved of weapons are not prosecuted unless the gun has been used for criminal activity. When reports of a gun being used are received, even if only to threaten, a rapid response team is usually sent to demand that elders from the community concerned to locate and hand over the weapon.

## **Challenges to Weapons Collection and Disarmament Efforts**

The community weapons collection initiatives have been very encouraging.

However, there are various challenges met in the process.

Accountability of security personnel for their guns and ammunition is seen as

a key aspect of reducing proliferation and availability of weapons in arid  
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areas. It was noted that in the past decade or so there has been a sharp deterioration in this respect.

**Confidentiality:** In the event where the elders plan a forceful disarmament of an individual who is perceived to be harmful and careless and thereby pass information to police, the information may be leaked out hence hampering the disarming process

**Monitoring:** It has not been easy to establish the statistics, movements and uses of guns within a particular district and the region.

**Security and disarmament:** Though the communities are co-operative in disarming and voluntary weapons collection and surrender, there is no security guarantee for them. This makes the condition difficult.

## **Conclusion**

The ethnic pattern of acquisition of small arms in the cross-border areas dates from the pre-colonial era, with recurring themes of communal resource-based competition, regional instability and insurgencies, state weakness, marginalization and confrontation with the state. The repressive, corrupt or non-existent state security in rural areas has led to communities taking responsibility for their own security. Communities have used several methods to acquire arms: private purchase, attacks on government soldiers and revenge battles. In the attempt to improve security in such remote and difficult-to-manage areas, the states have resorted both to the use of paramilitary forces and to the pouring of legal weapons into the areas.

While this may provide an increased sense of security in the short term, in the long term, it would be feeding localized arms races. The communities living along the Kenya-Somalia border are therefore trapped in a spiral of rising violent crime and insecurity, which is being fed by the flow of small arms into the area. Unless checked, the flow of arms from conflict areas to non-conflict areas is likely to feed this spiral of violence and insecurity and will ultimately lead to the creation of more violent communities in the Horn region. The cost of guns has drastically reduced, indicating that the region is awash with arms. Ammunition prices have however gone up, implying that more research on ammunition is necessary, as it could be the best approach to managing the small arms problems in the cross-border region in the short run.

However, addressing supply without addressing demand is futile; this study has shown that guns are now an instrument of economic subsistence hence it would argued that it's taking away people's source of livelihood thus creating further conflicts.

However, before disarmament could kick off, the government should strive to understand and unravel the myth behind gun culture. Questions as to why people acquire guns should be debated upon and consulted widely. The state should first assure by action that it can guarantee the security of all, and then proceed to convince the communities that they (communities) no longer need the guns for everybody is safe.

Disarmament should be a gradual process based on consultation and consensus building between the government and the concerned

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communities. It should be not perceived as a calculated move to make certain communities vulnerable to attacks or so. At minimum, disarmament should be done regionally and not restricted to certain districts or regions in Kenya.