

# Identifying the Culprits: Tracking the Circulation of Small Arms

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has been a concern for many during the last decade. Non-governmental organizations and governments have been working hand-in-hand to deal with the issue. Governments are responsible for the safety and security of their citizens and thus change and enforce policy to adapt to our ever-evolving world. Non-governmental organizations assess impact and responses; as representatives of civil society they monitor the state and suggest policy changes to facilitate a safer environment. Should the situation arise where the general public perceives the state as being unable to carry out its duty to protect them, the populace may try to protect itself. One of the main occurrences shaping a community's perception of insecurity is needless violence during crime.

The perception among the public in South Africa is that violent crime is increasing.<sup>1</sup>

This has led to increased applications for firearm licences and with more firearms comes the potential for their loss. However the South African Firearms Control Act came into force on 1 July 2004. This new piece of legislation places stricter controls on legal firearm ownership than the out-of-date legislation it replaced.

The new legislation should have a positive impact on the rest of the continent. Tighter controls on the ownership of weapons in South Africa, for example, could lead to a decline in firearms being sold within the country. In addition, the new legislation requires more stringent controls to be maintained over weapons by firearm owners, which should lead to less theft and fewer losses. Stricter regulations over the import and export of firearms

should also benefit the Southern Africa region.

## Legacy

While control over known weapon sources is relatively easy to establish, remnants of war are available to many people in Southern Africa. Little control was exerted over weaponry issued to combatants in the conflict areas throughout the region and some of these areas remain unstable. This uncertainty over the availability of weapons can impact on

disarmament policies, as fears for personal safety may mean individuals retain weapons for personal security.

## Frequently used firearms

In South Africa two different firearm calibres are preferred for criminal use, the

9x19 mm and .38 Special rounds.

These calibre rounds are used in various hand and sub-machine guns found in Southern Africa.

Both these weapon types are easy to conceal and can be used


inconspicuously, making them a choice for criminals.

The following weapons have been reported as problematic by several countries in Southern Africa during a workshop on the identification of firearms and explosives, held in South Africa in 2003 by the Southern African Regional Police Chiefs Cooperation Organization (SARPPCO). The participants in the workshop noted that these weapons were the most notorious, but by no means the only problematic weaponry found in their countries. Each country stated that it had problems with some, if not all, of the following firearms.

## Pistols

- Tokarev TT-33
- Beretta 92
- CZ (Range)
- Lorcin
- Baby Browning
- Z88
- Lugar
- Vektor (Range)
- Star
- Walther P38
- NORINCO
- Walther (Range)
- Browning HP
- Colt
- SIG-Sauer
- Astra
- Taurus
- Jennings

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**Revolver**

- Rossi
- Smith & Wesson
- Colt
- Ruger
- Taurus
- Arminius
- Webley & Scott
- Olympic 6

**Rifles, sub-machine guns and machine pistols**

- AK-47
- FN FAL 7.62
- UZI
- LM4
- Simonov
- Heckler & Koch G3
- R4
- R5
- Galil 7.62
- LM5
- Skorpion

**Shotguns**

- 12 Gauge Baikal
- 12 Gauge Stevens
- 12 Gauge Pietro Beretta

**Homemade firearms**

- "Zip" guns

**Calibres**

- .308
- 30.06
- .375
- .45
- .303 MK I & II
- .38 Special
- .357
- .22

**Similarity of weapons**

Similarity in basic weapon design contributes to the difficulty of identifying different firearms. Such a variety of weapons is available that it is becoming exceedingly complicated to identify a specific weapon that has been found. For example, the well-known AK-47 assault rifle has been manufactured as various models by numerous countries. In an effort to lower manufacturing costs by using material available in the region, each manufacturer made some changes to the basic weapon design according to need, further complicating identification.

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**Distinctive characteristics**

AK-47<sup>2</sup>



AK-47s



AK-M



**Identification and recording**

Specialist knowledge is necessary to identify these weapons; therefore databases need to be developed to track the circulation of firearms across the subregion of Southern Africa. Records should be kept of where each weapon was found and research should be done to ascertain the country of origin. This would help to establish weapon distribution patterns on the African continent.

For example, on weapons such as the AK-47 and its variants, there are selector markings on the right side of the weapon and factory markings on the left side that can

be used to identify the country of origin (unless these markings are intentionally obscured by the manufacturing country).

**Example of identification**

- *Photo Identification*  
Factory markings (Left side of weapon)



- Selector markings (Right side of weapon)



- *Known markings*

Left side of weapon



Right side of weapon



### Obstacles in firearm identification

Weapon identification has been acknowledged as a major challenge for the police agencies in Southern Africa. Weapons that are retrieved may be of unknown origin and difficult to identify. Firearms used in criminal activity often have the serial number and all other identification markings removed in an attempt to make it impossible to determine the origin of the weapon. Some firearms can only be grouped according to calibre for identification purposes. There are several identification databases available in the world but they do not address the specific needs of the Southern African region.

### African weapons database

The SARPCCO workshop on the identification of firearms and explosives expressed the need for an identification database that covers the weapons found in the Southern Africa region. Such a database would include photos and representations of markings to assist with the identification of different firearms. The value of such a database would include the following:

- Police would be able to:
  - identify firearms found in their respective countries with more accuracy,
  - share knowledge with each other;
- Court officials would find it easier to prepare for court cases where specialist knowledge is needed;
- General areas where certain weapons are found would be identified;
- Origins of found weapons would be determined with greater accuracy;
- Comprehensive records would be compiled of weaponry found in the Southern African region;
- Standardisation of global terminology could occur which would enhance the debate on firearm proliferation and related issues;
- Language issues and interpretation could be addressed to standardise legal definitions; and
- The database would also assist civil society members who are active in the field of small arms and light weapons proliferation, with subject knowledge of firearms and related practical issues.

A prototype of such a database is currently under development and its progress will be updated in this newsletter.

### Endnotes

- 1 Ted Leggett, The facts behind the figures, *Crime statistics 2002/3, Crime Quarterly no 6, December 2003*, p 5.
- 2 Photographs courtesy of the South African Police Service. Photographer: Ben Coetzee.

