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## Firearms Safety in Somaliland: From Mine Action to Community Safety

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CEDAC is interested in establishing a nationwide peer-support program for trauma survivors of all types in Burundi; however, the organization currently lacks the funding and personnel to do this. The current project relies heavily on the volunteer efforts of CEDAC's staff and the workshop participants. Under the current Niarchos grant, CISR will return to Burundi in 2012 to offer peer-support training for other groups, including women with disabilities.

CEDAC views this workshop as a step toward gender equality in Burundi. CEDAC's communes gave female ex-combatants a safe environment to recover, but these women will need to return to society soon. Hopefully, building their capacity through workshops of this kind will help them become leaders, caregivers and advocates for women's rights in Burundi and throughout Africa.

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Cameron Macauley, MPH, joined CISR in August 2010 as Peer Support and Trauma Rehabilitation Specialist. He holds degrees in anthropology and psychology, and became a Physician Assistant in 1983. He has worked in a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border, at a district hospital in Sumatra, as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guinea-Bissau, in Mozambique where he taught trauma surgery for landmine injuries, in an immunization program in Angola and in a malaria-control program in Brazil. Between 2005 and 2010, he taught mental-health courses for Survivor Corps in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Jordan and Vietnam.

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Monica Onyango, Ph.D., MS, MPH, RN, is a Clinical Assistant Professor of International Health at Boston University School of Public Health, where she teaches courses in managing disasters and complex humanitarian emergencies, and sexual and reproductive health in disaster settings. Onyango served in the Kenya Ministry of Health for 10 years as a Nursing Officer, worked as a Health Team Leader with international NGOs in relief and development in Angola, South Sudan and in a refugee camp in Kenya. She also participated in training South Sudanese health workers on emergency obstetrics and neonatal care. Onyango's research interests focus on reproductive health, maternal and child health, HIV/AIDS, health care among populations affected by war and natural disasters, and the role of nurses and midwives in improving maternal and child health. She holds a doctorate in nursing, a Master of Science (nursing), a Master in Public Health, a diploma in advanced nursing, and a diploma in general nursing and midwifery.

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The program encouraged the women to help each other rather than rely on outsiders.



Eric Niragira, a former combatant in Burundi, founded CEDAC in 2005 to fight armed violence and assist ex-combatants. CEDAC has received support from CISR, United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to undertake its peace-building and development initiatives, such as campaigns for the voluntary handover of firearms and training in peer-to-peer support. Winner of the Niarchos Prize 2010 which honors individuals who promote resilience in conflict-affected areas, Niragira is involved in several projects to promote the rights of women, veterans and people with disabilities in Burundi.

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## Firearms Safety in Somaliland: From Mine Action to Community Safety

Multiple border and civil wars have left Somaliland contaminated with explosive remnants of war and a surplus of small arms and light weapons. Today, unsecured firearms threaten daily life in rural villages, resulting in more deaths in Somaliland than from recent landmine incidents. Addressing the need for firearm security, Danish Demining Group provides training and awareness through its Community Safety program.

by William Vest-Lillesøe [ Danish Demining Group ]

Together with the rest of Somalia, the northwest region of Somaliland (previously British Somaliland) has a bloody past with years of civil war. Although it is not internationally recognized as a legitimate state, in 1991, it declared its independence from Somalia and became the Republic of Somaliland. Since then, the region has enjoyed relative peace and stability. With help from the Somali diaspora, Somaliland managed to establish a relatively well-functioning government with democratic elections and good (though mostly unofficial) diplomatic ties.<sup>1</sup>

### Mine Action and Community Safety

Following years of war, large areas of Somaliland became contaminated with landmines, explosive remnants of war and surplus small arms and light weapons. Funded by the United Nations Development Programme and the Danish International Development Agency, DDG began clearing minefields in Somaliland in 1999, alongside other agencies such as Rimfire, a British commercial mine-action agency. Shortly afterwards, The HALO Trust and Santa Barbara, a German nongovernmental organization, joined the effort.<sup>2</sup> By 2006, DDG had cleared more than 11,000 landmines and

more than 124,000 ERW. With fewer contaminated areas and evidence of a greater rate of incidents caused by SA/LW than mines and ERW, DDG decided to shift its focus away from traditional mine action toward a broader approach addressing safety within local communities. In 2009, the Somaliland Mine Action Centre reported 19 incidents and 23 casualties from mines and ERW. DDG research from the same year estimated more than 7,500 firearm accidents and at least 11,000 incidents involving shootings or threats with firearms. Consequently, DDG started its Community Safety program in Somaliland in 2008 with funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup>

DDG envisioned that a much bigger impact on human safety (regarding physical harm and the psychological feeling of security) could be achieved by using its resources to address the SA/LW problem instead of continuing traditional mine clearance in Somaliland. The 2006 *Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development* greatly inspired the new approach. The declaration highlights the role of armed violence as an obstacle to sustainable development and aims toward the fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals, a



Close-up of a gun clamp developed by DDG. See larger photo on following page. All photos courtesy of the author.

In a small plain room in the village of Adan Abokor in rural Somaliland, around 20 locals squeezed together on benches along the walls: women on one side and men on the other. Latecomers peeked through a window as several curious children stood in the doorway. They had gathered to attend a session in firearms safety education, a part of DDG's Community Safety program in Somaliland. With the help of illustrations to teach risk awareness and prevent accidents, the facilitator covered different types of firearms and dangerous situations. The participants then contributed personal experiences and stories from their communities. In one instance, a boy and his sister were home alone and found a gun. They played with it, and the girl put her finger in the barrel while the boy pulled the trigger. The girl survived but lost her lower arm. Another man's father accidentally shot himself while trying to set a trap for a wild animal that was eating his goats. Still another young man almost killed his sister when he accidentally fired his father's gun. Fortunately, the bullet only grazed her head.



In collaboration with local communities, DDG has developed safe-storage devices, such as this gun clamp as well as boxes for pistols and ammunition. The devices are locked with a padlock and chained to the foundation of the owner's house, and they have proven very successful in preventing accidents and theft.



Inhabitants of Adan Abokor village in Somaliland attend a Firearms Safety Education workshop by DDG. The workshop teaches safe handling of firearms and sensitizes communities to the dangers of keeping firearms in the home.

group of eight goals that range from halving poverty and hunger to reducing child mortality and providing universal education by 2015.<sup>4</sup> More than 100 states signed the declaration so far, thereby committing to strengthen efforts to reduce and prevent armed violence, nationally and internationally.

As a guideline for policy, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development created a tool, the Armed Violence Lens, which addresses firearms (instruments), the perpetrators of violence (agents) and the institutions that help sustain a culture of armed violence from national to global levels.<sup>5</sup> DDG also used OECD's Armed Violence Lens in the development of its Community Safety program, a comprehensive approach that not only deals directly with the prevention of physical damage but also helps people cope with the psychological aspects of violence, including feelings of stress and anxiety regarding perceived accidents and threats. Feelings of insecurity can be as devastating as the actual presence of danger. Finally, mitigation and successful resolution of conflicts is achieved through conflict management and cooperation with local law enforcement. DDG also deploys the Community Safety program in the rest of Somalia, including Puntland, and in other countries such as South Sudan, Uganda and Yemen.

#### Firearms in Somaliland

In Somaliland, many families view firearms as a necessary means of defense. A 2009 DDG survey showed that 74 percent of Somaliland homes contained at least one firearm.<sup>2</sup> Although Somalia, including Somaliland, is one of Africa's most ethnically homogenous countries, it has a long history of fighting between different clans and subclans for territory, livestock and other resources. Clans are, in essence, extended families and can divide into several subclans or even sub-subclans and so on. The land is arid with little rainfall, and struggles between clans and within communities often revolve around control of scarce resources. If a clan or community is wronged, retaliation is expected, often drawing out conflicts for extended periods of time with extensive casualties until an agreement of compensation has been reached. These outbreaks of armed conflict have long been part of everyday life, especially in the rural areas of Somalia and Somaliland. Technological advancements in weapons manufacturing and years of civil wars throughout Somalia have replaced clubs and axes with pistols and AK-47s. The added destructive potential of these weapons, coupled with limited knowledge of the workings of firearms, results in thousands of accidents every year.

*In the village of Adan Abokor, most homes have had safe-storage devices installed and many have received firearms safety and conflict-management training. At the workshop, Yousuf Liswar, a teacher and community-safety volunteer, explained how the locals used to store their firearms, "In the past, we simply covered our weapons with a piece of cloth and hid them inside the houses or in holes or shrubs and we never felt completely safe doing that."*

*As the session came to a close, a woman stood up and spoke, "Our homes are scattered throughout the bush and are far between. We often need to visit our relatives and run errands when doing our domestic chores, and we used to feel very uneasy leaving the kids alone. Now we feel much safer and can do our work without fear of accidents."*



Years of war have resulted in a massive spread of firearms to civilian populations in Somalia, including the self-declared Republic of Somaliland. For many families, having a gun in the home is seen as a necessity to protect family and property. DDG addresses the problems associated with such a high frequency of gun ownership through its Community Safety program.

Part of DDG's community-safety work is to educate the local population on the dangers of keeping firearms at home and to teach safe handling and storage. For this purpose, DDG distributes safe-storage devices, including gun locks for rifles and metal boxes for pistols, both secured by padlock and chained to the foundation of the house. Their purpose is threefold:

- Prevent accidents in the home
- Guard against theft
- Create a barrier between the weapon and its user that gives time for reflection and second thoughts, especially when coupled with conflict-management techniques

Forcing people to disarm completely proves disastrous in many parts of the world, since it is often carried out selectively and without credible and accountable governmental security for the disarmed population afterward, making these populations vulnerable to attack. As a result, people see firearms possession as a necessary means to protect families, communities and possessions. DDG has had great success reducing violence by securing firearms with safe-storage devices and simultaneously providing alternatives to violence through education, conflict-management training and the establishment of safety committees at community and district levels.

#### Conclusion

Privately held firearms are not likely to diminish any time soon in Somaliland, because weapons are perceived as necessary tools for protection. The normalization of violence has resulted in desensitization to the dangers they pose. Statistics of firearms-related incidents, however, reveal significant reasons to address the issue. Mines and ERW still pose a threat to security, but

in most parts of Somaliland, where the high-risk minefields have been cleared, the physical and psychological impact of SA/LW safety remains significantly higher. A 2010 survey of DDG's Community Safety program showed a 47 percent increase in the number of respondents who said that the level of armed violence had decreased compared to the previous year, based on 509 households in 11 communities.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, only two percent of respondents had a firearms-related accident in the first year after the program launched compared to 14 percent before the intervention.<sup>3</sup>

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William Vest-Lillesøe is the Communications Assistant for Danish Demining Group, a unit within Danish Refugee Council, in the Horn of Africa and Yemen which is based in Nairobi, Kenya. He studied filmmaking at the National Czech Film Academy in Prague and subsequently worked with film and media production in Denmark. He also holds a Master of Arts in Anthropology from the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, where he graduated in 2011.

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Continent of Africa with Somalia in brown.  
 Map courtesy of CISR.