

NSAs in Africa: The Call to Action

Introduction

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) cites Africa as the continent with the largest number of conflicts. In such countries as the Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Zimbabwe and Angola, the 2003 *Landmine Monitor* reports widespread landmine use by non-state actors (NSAs), each seeking a myriad of political aims from recognition by the international community to government overthrow to political agitation through terrorism. The majority of NSAs involved in conflicts with internationally recognized governments on the African continent have rarely disclosed their political agendas nor have they outlined how their political agendas differ from those of the very governments against which they are fighting. Those issues that address the importation of landmines and other small arms and light weapons (SA/LW) and their use by soldiers of NSAs—who increasingly are adolescents—begin to clarify how mine action can assuage the conflict engulfing the majority of the continent. Rather than an isolated situation, landmines are intricately linked to those actors supplying state governments and NSAs and the individuals employing them. Yet the political and economic upshots of landmines are very real and are the products of many factors, including the SA/LW trade and the use of child soldiers by both NSAs and state governments.

NSAs and Geneva Call

The *Landmine Monitor* defines NSAs as “armed groups operating outside of govern-



Trauma counselor Florence Lakor, right, listens to 16-year-old Julius, as he tells of the two years he was forced by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) to live as a guerrilla fighter in Sudan and Uganda.

ment control.” Engaging NSAs in mine action is complex in that third-party recognition grants them validity in the international community even if their respective ends may be menacing and dubious. At the same time, treaties like the Ottawa Convention do not apply to NSAs, whatever their respective military power. Thus, the issue becomes establishing the understanding that if the insurgency group's true aims are consistent with humani-

tarian ideals, it must recognize the untold harm that landmines inflict upon innocent civilians and thus take steps towards mine action.

Such is the aim of Geneva Call, which is among the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that acknowledge NSAs in hopes of establishing a dialogue concerning mine action. Stating on its website that “Geneva Call is an international humanitarian organization dedicated to engaging armed NSAs to respect and to adhere to humanitarian norms, starting with the ban on anti-personnel mines,” the organization provides NSAs the opportunity to express their commitment to humanitarian ideals by adhering to the “Deed of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action.” Among the NSAs in Africa that have pledged adherence to the treaty are the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement /Army (SPLM/A), the Mozambique National Resistance, and the following factions within Somalia: Bandari, the Jowhar administration, Puntland State of Somalia, Raweyn Resistance Army (RRA), Somali National Front/Somali Reconciliation and Restoration Council, the Somali Patriotic

Movement, the Somali National Alliance, Southern Somali National Movement/Somali National Army (SSNM/SNA), and the United Somali Congress (USC). The number of such NSAs speaks to the political instability present within Africa, as well as the likelihood that such groups are impoverished, ill-equipped and thus heavily reliant upon suitable weapons like landmines.

Landmines rank highly in many NSAs' arsenals. As such, many NSAs claim that removing them from their munitions stores would hinder their political and military aims. As in the case of the SPLM/A in the Sudan, various factions of the disparate group continue to use landmines. Despite having signed a deed of commitment (DoC) with Geneva Call, the January 2004 issue of Geneva Call's NSA News states that “The SPLM/A has pointed out the challenge it faces in changing the behavior of its military personnel and allied factions, not to mention the practical difficulties associated with communicating over the remote areas they control.” Moreover, for this NSA and others, landmines are the cheapest and most effective weapon among their arsenal. Arrangements between NSAs and state governments demonstrate three similarities: their respective concern about anti-personnel mines' indiscriminate harm upon the civilian population; agreeing to allow third-party humanitarian relief missions to operate freely without providing a military advantage to either side; and disseminating education concerning the dangers of landmines. Such agreements validate the claims of both NSAs and the governments they are fighting that they have the highest of humanitarian ideals at stake. Yet these agreements also illustrate certain NSAs' leveraging power: a government with which an NSA negotiates must admit to its temporary inability to control or diffuse the NSA.

NSAs rarely announce their political agendas or seek attention in the international community, so establishing their aims or means of achieving them is difficult. Claude Bruderlein, director of the Harvard Program on Conflict Research and Humanitarian Policy, lists a variety of different types of NSAs, all whose “few shared characteristics result from their distinctly unofficial nature (compared with state actors), their greater flexibility and, often their unaccountability under national and international laws.” Among the key issues in which NSAs are involved, Bruderlein writes, are the illicit trade in small arms, the recruitment of child soldiers and the use of landmines. Perhaps nowhere is the demand—and indeed, the supply—greater than in Africa.

NSAs and SA/LW

Within a Westernized context, the various means by which NSAs acquire SA/LW,

including landmines, may appear cloudy. During the Cold War, the two global superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—were largely able to control the flow of SA/LW. Flooding the highly restricted market with SA/LW, the free-market economy sponsored by the United States and the communist oligarchy bolstering the Soviet Union clearly defined their international alliances and could thus clearly determine the interests of NSAs. Moreover, the two superpowers could ensure that if the arms were resold, they would not fall into the hands of sponsors of ideologies compatible with their respective enemies.

The Cold War SA/LW trade, however, often involved sales to countries in Central America and the Middle East, and while the Soviet Union's collapse has not directly generated more SA/LW, it has changed the means by which NSAs acquire SA/LW. Now the interests of NSAs are far more localized; economics rather than politics fuels the SA/LW trade, and with these weapons in greater supply, the means of violence are more greatly dispersed to a larger number of militias and insurgents.

In his article “Africa: The Political Economy of Small Arms and Conflicts,” Dr. Abdel-Fatau Musah writes that while the initial influx of SA/LW came from the United States and the Soviet Union, rogue arms brokers, private military companies, local smugglers and others have provided a bulk of the weaponry. Moreover, the conclusion of the Cold War lessened interest in the regulation of SA/LW. The resulting proliferation of private arms manufacturers gave rise to the culture of violence. In turn, this culture of violence heightened security concerns, which only begat more violence. Indeed, external affairs and interest from abroad controlled the supply of SA/LW. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, the political stakes coming from abroad diminished, yet there remained innumerable SA/LW. As such, junior-level military officers were free to instigate coups d'état, thereby internalizing these conflicts. With the de-emphasis of political means in the post-Cold War setting, arms dealers that once held political allegiances found themselves in a truly free market economy. They could indiscriminately supply arms to any number of rogue military leaders. In the 1960s, there were 99 manufacturers of SA/LW worldwide; by 1999, the figure had risen to 385. Sales in the

1960s totaled \$3 billion (U.S.), a figure that ballooned to \$25 billion (U.S.) in 1996 (Musah).

Musah concludes his article by distinguishing landmines from SA/LW. He claims that the campaign to end the production and transfer of the former has been far more successful than the latter. Nonetheless, the landmine problem remains pressing and several points need explication. In distinguishing SA/LW from landmines, he rightly points out that SA/LW are not the source of African conflicts, but serve a means to many rogue leaders' ends. Within this context, it becomes the purview of soldiers within NSAs to de-escalate the violence. At the same time, landmines are unique in that they function long after one has activated them. In this light, unexploded ordnance remain as menacing as the soldiers that operate SA/LW. The difference becomes negligible. Perhaps the employment of landmines has decreased in the wake of the global mine action campaign, but this is not to say that their threat to millions of innocent civilians is any smaller. Moreover, NSAs remain beyond third-party regulations and are just as likely to continue utilizing landmines as a means of both controlling civilian populations and protecting their own interests.

Child Combatants

Musah notes the following three results of the “so-called civil wars” taking place in Africa:

1. The influx of SA/LW has provided for a viable means of power for many civilian warlords.
2. War as become an end in itself, being that war provides the only means of legitimacy and subsistence for these leaders.
3. SA/LW have allowed for wars to be carried out by a variety of soldiers, not least of which are child combatants.

Although physical and mental capacities of child soldiers restrict them from using larger weapons, they can easily manage SA/LW. Moreover, they have very little apprehension towards employing landmines, often indiscriminately and carelessly.

In their article “Violence, Reconciliation and Identity,” Angela Veal and Aki Stavrou write that between 1998 and 2001, children were being used as soldiers in some 87 of 178 countries. As did Musah, Veal and Stavrou point out that “the value chain of weapons

technologies”—otherwise known as the proliferation of small arms—has three results. First, technological developments have provided for the manufacture of smaller and lighter weapons, which young soldiers can handle. Second, the Cold War, the time when two global superpowers could mostly regulate the distribution of available weapons, has ended and cash-strapped countries of the former Soviet Republic have provided for “the wholesale flooding of redundant, cheap but efficient weapons in Africa.” Third, NSAs recruit and include girls alongside boys as soldiers. Veal and Stavrou cite “confirmed reports of girls under the age of 18 in government forces, paramilitaries/militias and/or armed opposition groups in 36 countries between 1990 and 2000” and an additional 10 countries cited in the 2001 Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers Global Report, making a total of 46 countries out of 178 between 1990 and 2001.

Within a continent as politically and economically unstable as Africa, the only means that many youth and the poor have towards achieving financial stability is through the military. Moreover, the need is mutual; as both NSAs and established governments continue recruiting soldiers, dangers implicit in the military life lead adults to other occupations and professions. NSAs have no alternative but to prey upon impressionable teenagers. Militaries of established governments and NSAs seek youth for two reasons: the young are able to fill the void left in the wake of casualties to older soldiers, and they are far more impressionable and willing to take chances than older, more seasoned and cautious soldiers. Although the international community has pressured established governments to raise the age of conscription and enlistment—some governments allow boys to enlist at age 15—these governments have resisted such pressure. And the larger point remains that even if state-sponsored governments were to increase their ages of conscription, NSAs are already operating illegally and have no moral or legal obligation to resist preying on children.

The Lord's Resistance Army

In Africa, the use of child soldiers is especially pressing as in the case of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an NSA operating

along the border between northern Uganda and the southern border of the Sudan. Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA, claims to be a medium of spiritual forces, and his unique charisma and ideology draw scores of followers and soldiers. The group largely operates upon the notion of terror, for it recruits children through abduction: boys as soldiers, girls as wives and concubines. Indigenous peoples to the Acholi land where the LRA operates are often displaced both by the NSA's movements and by the need to seek refuge at night in nearby towns where children are less likely to be abducted.

The LRA also provides an interesting point in the NSA situation in Africa in that it has received financial and military support over the course of the past 15 years from the dominant Muslim Sudanese government to the north of Uganda. The Sudan's support of the LRA is the result of the Ugandan government's own support of the mainly Christian SPLM/A, another NSA operating in the south of the Sudan. Indeed, despite the thousands of miles that separate the two and the passage of some 13 years since the fall of the Soviet Union, the case of the Cold War points to how larger states competing for power allow for smaller insurgencies to skew the methods of diplomacy. So long as the international community and the countries involved fail to resolve their larger disputes, mine action will be of lesser importance and innocent civilians will be left to pay the price.

Towards the Future

To discard the issue of NSAs is to turn a blind eye to an already established threat in the mine action community. As landmines provide a primary means of warfare and terrorism, it is imperative that mine action address the issue of NSAs; their impact upon innocent civilian lives is simply too great. As this article points out in the case of the LRA, the international conflicts between such countries as the Sudan and Uganda provide a fertile ground for a myriad of NSAs to exist and elude the interests of both countries. Correlating children's use of landmines with the SA/LW trade reveals that indeed, the issue is not only a continental one, but the upshot of irresponsibility by the global community and those countries that once flooded the caches of both established governments and NSAs during the Cold War. Indeed, these fac-

tors have produced the humanitarian crisis in the Sudan, where innocent refugees are left to pick and choose escape routes among areas littered with landmines, chased by militias with singular and sinister motives. As many politicians within the United States have already remarked upon the crisis of the Sudan as perhaps the next African genocide, it is important to remember that while these conflicts are not the direct result of international indifference, they are at least the results of many years of indirect complicity. The SA/LW trade has fueled the rancor of localized African communities and the potential results may well compound the guilt that already burdens the conscience of the international community.

* Photo c/o AP.

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