Ammunition Stockpile Management: A Global Challenge Requiring Global Responses

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Aging, unstable, and excess conventional ammunition stockpiles pose the dual risk of accidental explosions at munition sites and diversion to illicit markets, thereby constituting a significant danger to public safety and security. More than half of the world’s countries have experienced an ammunition storage area explosion over the past decades, resulting in severe humanitarian and socioeconomic consequences. Thousands of people have been killed, injured, and displaced, and the livelihoods of entire communities have been disrupted. The humanitarian impact of unintended explosions is amplified when they occur in urban areas, as illustrated by ammunition depot explosions in a crowded area in Brazzaville in 2011, resulting in approximately 500 killed, 2,500 injured, and 121,000 made homeless.

Improper ammunition management is also at the root of the diversion of arms and ammunition to illicit markets and onward proliferation, thus fueling armed conflict, terrorism, and crime. Diverted conventional ammunition allows non-State actors, such as rebels, gangs, criminal organizations, and terrorist groups to enhance their military capabilities. Its explosive nature makes ammunition particularly attractive for the manufacture of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Essential for adequate stockpile management is the identification and disposal of obsolete, surplus, and unsafe
ammunition. Often, the entirety of the national ammunition stockpile is seen as strategically and operationally valuable, resulting in the accumulation of surpluses and unsafe ammunition that pose a significant and completely avoidable risk.4

In many developing and conflict-affected countries, defective stockpile management has been assessed as the norm rather than the exception, notably due to the lack of resources, infrastructure, and trained personnel. In these circumstances, addressing the matter of surpluses also requires a focus on the lack of appropriate laws, policies, and procedures as well as the lack of political awareness. In the absence of such a holistic approach to ammunition management, governments often remain unaware of surplus stocks, and national stockpiles continue to be a risk to public safety and a source for crime and armed violence.4

INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS IN AMMUNITION MANAGEMENT

In recognition of the threats of accidental explosions and diversion, international efforts to promote the safe and secure management of ammunition have increased in recent years, as has the demand for relevant technical support. At the request of the General Assembly (A/RES/63/61), the United Nations developed the International Ammunition Technical Guidelines (IATG) in 2011 to ensure a consistent delivery of high-quality advice and support in ammunition management. The UN SaferGuard Programme was simultaneously established as the corresponding knowledge management platform to oversee and disseminate the IATG.5

The United Nations also promotes safe and secure ammunition management in the broader context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions and its target related to a significant reduction in illicit arms flows. Moreover, securing excessive and poorly-managed ammunition stockpiles constitutes a key component in realizing the “Disarmament that Saves Lives” pillar of the Secretary-General’s agenda for disarmament, “Securing Our Common Future.”6 The Secretary-General calls for more effective State and regional action on excessive and poorly-maintained stockpiles to prevent serious humanitarian hazards that jeopardize the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (Action 22).

VALUE OF THE IATG

Effective application of the IATG mitigates the dangers of unwanted explosions and frequent diversion. With the IATG, States have at their disposal practical, neutral, and authoritative guidance for ammunition stockpile management. This guidance offers common language and a coherent reference point in the form of globally accepted good practices. Compiled in 12 thematic volumes and 45 modules, the IATG represent a comprehensive and gradual approach to life-cycle management of ammunition.

Importantly, the IATG take into account diversity in States’ capacities. They do so by equating activities necessary for safe, efficient, and effective stockpile management to one of three risk-reduction process levels (RRPLs). States can utilize the RRPL system in addressing the safety and security of their ammunition in a gradual, incremental fashion: the degree of complexity of each task and the resources required for its implementation determines to which RRPL it is assigned.

![Figure 1: Outline process for developing national standards for ammunition management. Figure courtesy of UN SaferGuard.](https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol23/iss2/8)
Maintaining stockpile management processes at the basic level (RRPL 1) already significantly reduces the brzen risks associated to ammunition.

Using the RRPL framework as a baseline in determining the condition of their ammunition stocks, States can also identify key safety and security issues, such as prioritizing national standards development and implementation in order to optimize the use of resources and capabilities.7

Applying the IATG at the national level is not merely a technical undertaking. Insufficient risk awareness; absence of institutional, legislative, and operational frameworks; and lack of staff capacity and skills are recognized as common characteristics of inadequate management of State-owned ammunition stockpiles.7 The sustainable application of the IATG thus requires a holistic approach including the establishment of a normative framework, organizational structure, equipment and infrastructure, personnel management, institutionalized training, and requisite financial resources.

APPLICATION OF THE IATG

The IATG are not meant to be a blueprint that can be replicated at the national level, regardless of the circumstances. Instead, they provide the underpinning principles and guidance on which national standards, processes, and technical operating procedures should be developed.7 Based on guidance in the IATG, States should establish an appropriate legislative framework, formalize a respective national authority, and approve tolerable risk levels. States may also adopt relevant IATG modules as the basis for national standards.7

A critical component of a holistic ammunition management approach is the development of a national strategy or action plan with realistic goals and milestones. Recognizing and taking ownership of ammunition safety and security challenges at the State level is paramount to achieving a shared national vision on long-term objectives. This strategy enables States to prioritize activities and assigns roles and responsibilities more effectively. By defining clear goals and milestones, States can demonstrate their understanding of the challenge, ability to plan in the long-term, and that response options were adequately considered. This public commitment to addressing the challenges pertaining to ammunition stockpiles can give the international community confidence to provide required resources and technical support.7

To facilitate IATG dissemination, the UN SaferGuard Programme developed a series of resources to support national authorities, regional organizations, and partners on the ground in their efforts toward safe, secure, and efficient ammunition stockpile management. The IATG implementation support toolkit provides web-based applications for use by ammunition stockpile managers. These resources are also useful in communicating risks to leaders, raising awareness of the risks arising from inadequate ammunition management, as well as minimum safety and security remedies. Most recently, the UN SaferGuard Programme published three support guides to make the IATG more accessible. Besides enhancing the understanding of the IATG, these resources increase its usability within national ammunition management systems.

- Critical Path Guide to the International Ammunition Technical Guidelines assists users in navigating the principles, methodology, and technical content of the IATG.8
- A Guide to Developing National Standards for Ammunition Management supports States in the development of IATG-based national standards and an organizational framework for effective, coordinated, and sustainable national ammunition management.9
- Utilizing the IATG in Conflict-Affected and Low-Capacity Environments offers guidance on how basic ammunition stockpile safety and security can be improved in conflict-affected and low-capacity environments.10

To promote comprehensive and sustainable application of the IATG, translation of the IATG and its support resources into different languages is an important requirement. While the full version of the IATG is available in English, Arabic, Portuguese, and Russian, the UN SaferGuard Programme is currently translating all modules and support resources into French and Spanish.
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND ASSISTANCE

International cooperation and assistance is often essential to addressing problems associated with national ammunition stockpiles. Immediate, short-term assistance interventions by specialist organizations can be crucial in preventing humanitarian disasters. However, inadequate ammunition management cannot be sustainably addressed from the outside through only discrete activities such as the delivery of training packages, construction of infrastructure, and the destruction of stockpiles. Experience has shown that comprehensive, nationally-owned approaches are more effective in the long term, gradually establishing the required knowledge, capacity, and national systems for safe and secure ammunition management.

There is an increasing number of projects aimed at developing ammunition management capacities across the globe. Such efforts are undertaken through multiple channels by various actors and sometimes involve insufficient coordination and duplication of efforts. Those States offering and receiving assistance, as well as organizations building capacities on the ground, would benefit from coordinating activities and information sharing. A number of regional organizations have an active role in channeling assistance and stimulating national buy-in. Such regional cooperation is key in consolidating lessons learned from similar activities and in capitalizing on expertise relevant to other countries or organizations.

Evaluating the impact of international cooperation and assistance can be difficult. Assistance-providing States and organizations that develop coherent indicators can better observe and capture changes on the ground, including with regards to national normative frameworks, organizational structures and procedures, training and doctrine development, equipment and maintenance, personnel management, and finances and infrastructure. Besides measuring progress with indicators, project results should be made publicly available so stakeholders can better understand specific challenges and respond effectively in different contexts.

AMMUNITION MANAGEMENT ADVISORY TEAM

To contribute to more effective and sustainable action on ammunition management, the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) jointly established the Ammunition Management Advisory Team (AMAT), a Geneva-based technical assistance mechanism. Eleven AMAT seeks to enhance State and regional action on safe and secure ammunition management in line with the U.N. Secretary-General’s agenda for disarmament. Besides providing sustainable technical support and assistance in accordance with the IATG, it contributes to making international cooperation and assistance more coherent and effective by developing a global information platform on ammunition management capacity and by facilitating meetings to match needs, resources, and expertise.
CONCLUSION

Over the past decade, governments have increasingly engaged in ammunition safety and security topics, and demand for technical management support is on the rise. A growing number of States as well as international and regional NGOs now provide financial support and technical assistance in this area. The financial implications and technical capacity requirements in safe and effective management of ammunition are often significant. In this regard, international cooperation and assistance has become a central component of efforts to address ammunition safety and security. These efforts have been strengthened by the availability of the U.N.-developed, universally accepted IATG.

While in recent years there have been important developments in this area, major challenges remain. Many States continue to be at high risk of diversion and accidental explosions. Holistic approaches need to incorporate greater awareness of the risks from inadequate ammunition management, along with acceptance of responsibility for risk mitigation, development of appropriate laws, policies and procedures, as well as capacity-building.

States with limited capacities can benefit from IATG application by incrementally reducing risk, thus making communities safer and more secure. The IATG can be used for developing national frameworks, prioritizing those activity areas that need to be addressed urgently. Establishing national strategies, standards, and action plans that reflect the IATG in their goals and incremental targets is critical for a sustainable ammunition management system and may also attract external support and resources.

The availability of the IATG in an increasing number of languages as well as the expansion of supporting resources under the UN SaferGuard Programme make the IATG more accessible and facilitate their application at the national level.

The newly established AMAT seeks to accelerate global outreach and capacity-building efforts in line with the IATG and promotes effective and sustainable international cooperation and assistance. This has significant potential to improve national ammunition management policy and practices in many countries.

States and organizations continue enhancing their engagement in the area of safe and secure ammunition management. Deepened commitment, increased awareness, more effective coordination of efforts, and the availability of consistent technical capacity to provide assistance are key components for achieving sustainable change on the ground.

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