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Machetes: The Unacknowledged 'Small Arm'?

A Case for Regulating the Sale of Machetes in Times of Crisis

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The Rwandan genocide etched the use of the machete as a weapon of mass violence into our collective imagination. During the January 2008 conflict in Kenya, machetes also became a widely used tool of terror and bloodshed. It seems that the perpetrators are all too aware of this connection. Reports of groups of young men wielding their knives and yelling "Rwanda, Rwanda" again raised concerns about the scale of atrocity that is possible even without conventional weapons of war.

The purpose of a machete is of course primarily civilian and non-violent. Machetes are a central tool for small-scale farming, gardening and collecting firewood. However in the context of community or national conflict they have also proved to be one of the most readily available tools of atrocity including rape, amputation and murder.

While visiting a community project in Kibera, Nairobi's largest slum, several years ago, I heard the account of a young woman describing their experience of inter-communal conflict. In one instance, a fight broke out between members of two communities, and within an hour the supermarket on the main road had sold all of its machetes. The remainder of the story is too grim to recount.

As Kenya's post-election crisis unfolded in January 2008, questions arose once again about the sheer numbers of machetes readily available to groups of young men, particularly men in urban areas. Were supermarkets allowing young men to walk in and buy large numbers of machetes over the counter, knowing full well what they will be used for? Were the men supplied with these weapons? If so, by whom? Who owns the businesses that supplied machetes? Do they question the rise in sales? Were these companies taking active steps to produce or import more to cope with the demand? And who, if anybody, is responsible for regulating these supplies?

Weapons in the region

There is growing global momentum to regulate the proliferation of illegal small arms which devastate the lives of civilians in Africa and across the world. These efforts have gained force in the last decade through civil society campaigning, and the leadership of a handful of committed governments. In late 2006 the majority of the world's governments agreed to draft an international Arms Trade Treaty.

The commitment of Governments to control illegal arms is a welcome development in the East and Horn of Africa where recent and ongoing conflicts, combined with a lack of effective systems for monitoring and regulation, have made illegal small arms readily available to civilian populations. Situated in the centre of this region, Kenya has inevitably been affected. A recent national study estimated that 6%, or roughly 1 in 17 Kenyan civilians have access to small arms. The statistics are of course gendered, with women both less likely to own and likely to want to possess illegal small arms. (Government of Kenya, 2006:16–19). The statistics suggest a relatively high


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percentage of illegal arms in circulation for a country, at least at the time of the survey, in a state of 'peace'.

Regionally, the Kenyan government has shown leadership on the issue of the trade and circulation of illegal small arms. It hosted discussions towards the Nairobi Declaration on the Problem of the Proliferation of Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lake Region and the Horn of Africa, signed in 2000, which cemented a regional commitment to regulate the sale and ownership of small arms, and strengthen laws concerning their illicit trade and use. In partnership with NGOs, the Kenyan government has also taken steps to measure the scale of illegal small arms proliferation within Kenya, and develop policies to tackle this. A comprehensive National Action Plan for Arms Control and Management was put in place in 2006.

Controlling supply

Machetes are not considered conventional tools of war and as such do not fit within the definition of a small arm. However from Sierra Leone to Rwanda to the current crisis in Kenya, they have been used alongside small arms as tools of mass intimidation and violence. The widespread availability of large numbers of machetes in times of crisis clearly has the potential to wreak serious devastation. It is in on that basis that I would argue for the need to consider a case for regulating sales.

It would be absurd to put a blanket ban, harsh laws, or registration requirements around a product which is, in most instances, a harmless tool.

There is arguably a case to be made for regulating the sale of machetes and other large knives, in particular the retail sale of large numbers of these products, in times of conflict or national crisis. The idea is not unprecedented and there are examples that can be drawn from other everyday goods that can be used to cause harm. In the United Kingdom, for example, there are regulations prohibiting the number of painkillers an individual can purchase on any one day. This is due to the fact that overdosing on painkillers is a common form of suicide. Such controls would not be foolproof but they could go some way to limiting public access to tools of violence. As is the case with small arms, the business community, including manufacturers, importers and distributors, will need to acknowledge their role and responsibilities regarding supply, and in finding creative solutions and implementing policies that are developed.

On first glance this may seem like a trivial issue, however the sheer scale of the devastation caused by the use of machetes as weapons will hopefully be cause for dialogue. ■

References

Government of Kenya. 2006. Kenya National Action Plan for Arms Control and Management.

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