Societal Derivations for the Illegal Gun Trafficking
In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

By
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Abstract
Civilians are not allowed to buy or own a gun in Ethiopia. There are national laws, regulations and administrative procedures that allow production, export, import, and retransfer of small arms which are limited to state and federal security purposes; while any other, if any, is explained by the anti-terrorists act. The law requires a record of the acquisition, possession and transfer of each privately held firearm be retained in an official register. Nonetheless, both the anti-terrorist act and other firearm regulations, have not been successfully implemented to prevent illicit trafficking of guns and violent crimes associated with illegal gun possession. Church graveyards and jungles have been the busiest illegal gun exchange belts. This research assesses the societal apprehension to the illicit gun exchange. Residents in the village where illegal gun trafficking takes place have negative impressions to it. The illegal gun exchange create fear in city residents; limit the right of people to movement; and embarrass so many others. Trust in the police for security has diminished because, residents understood policemen themselves, as part of the illicit trafficking. The midnight time when people are most likely asleep is the peak time for gun trafficking and fire-testing. This compels citizens to prognosticate the impending terrorism.

1. General Background
The illegal use and exchange of guns is not a singular problem, but is complex, entrenched and poses significant challenges to communities, police and policy makers, (Gavin, Chris and Daniel, 2006). Furthermore, the relationship between illegal firearms and crime is dynamic, and as a consequence ongoing efforts are required to keep abreast of changes to ensure appropriate response by authorities.

The United Nations ‘Plan of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons’ proposed a Program of Action that calls on States to take steps to curtail the illicit traffic in Small Arms and Light Weapons. The Program of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects defines measures that governments of member states should take to control the black market trade in arms, (Ethiopia, 2008). It not only made recommendations on the control of imports, exports and transfers to prevent diversion to illicit use, but also requires member states to: make illicit gun production/possession a criminal offense; establish a national coordination agency on small arms; identify and destroy stocks of surplus weapons; keep track of officially-held guns; Disarmament, Demobilizations & Re-integration (DDR) of ex-combatants, including collection and destruction of their weapons; Support regional agreements and encourage moratoria; Mark guns at point of manufacture for identification and tracking; Maintain records of gun manufacture; Engage in more
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information exchange; Ensure better enforcement of arms embargoes; Include civil society organizations in efforts to prevent small arms proliferation.

According to Alpers and Marcus, 2014, there are several sources for firearms. They may be diverted from legal owners in a country, or they may be purchased overseas (legally or illegally) and smuggled into a country. Diverted weapons come from both private owners and the protective services. Guns and other weapons are also available from disbanded guerrilla troops in post-conflict situations, (BJA\(^1\), 2000). One of the main strategies employed by arms traffickers to procure guns is the use of “straw purchasers”\(^2\), (Ludwig, 2005). The other source of firearms for use in criminal activity is the in-country diversion of legally acquired firearms and ammunition to illegal use, (UN, 2005). According to UN (2005), to prevent the re-use of weapons in gun-related crimes, it is critical that guns be traceable and that weapons seized be securely stored and properly disposed of. This requires effective procedures for acquisition, marking, licensing, registration, operation and storage.

All of the guns, procured from the above-mentioned sources and by the various mechanisms, contribute to the stockpile of circulating illicit firearms. However, due to poor forensic investigation of firearm-related crimes and non-existent tracing of firearms, it is not possible to know what contribution each of these sources make to the problem of guns and criminality in communities (IACP\(^3\), 2011). One well-known intervention that has been used to withdraw illegal guns from circulation has been that of gun buybacks. It has been used in several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean with variable success (IACP, 2011).

In Ethiopia there are national laws, regulations and administrative procedures that allow production, export, import and retransfer of small arms which are limited to state and federal security purposes; while any other, if any, is related and explained by the anti-terrorist’s act (Ethiopia, 2008). It is strictly prohibited to trade in both small arms and light weapons. The law requires a record of any acquisition, possession and transfer of each privately held firearm be retained in an official register. State agencies are required on demand, to maintain records of the storage and movement of all firearms and ammunition under their control.

However, the anti-terrorist act and other firearm regulations, have not been successful in preventing the illicit trafficking of guns and violent crimes associated with illegal handgun possession. The failure of the government to control guns and the prevalence of crimes due to civilian’s illegal gun possession is the motive of the current research in order to assess the societal responses to the illicit gun exchange or trafficking in neighborhoods.

2. Justification

According to UN 2005, illegal guns are the most common causes for the violent crimes and murder all over the world. Ethiopia is one of the top countries cited for

\(^1\) BJA : Bureau of Justice Assistance
\(^2\) Straw purchasers: are acquaintances, relatives or persons hired to purchase guns.
\(^3\) IACP: International Association of Chiefs of Police
illicit gun trafficking which is believed to cause violent crimes and numerous deaths. Many countries in the list of illicit gun trafficking profile of the United Nations are depending on the extent and prevalence of registered firearms at production, export, import and caught at smuggling. In Ethiopia however, and for different reasons, the number of illegal guns and extent of smuggling are hardly known. Because, the nature/manner of illegal exchange and procurement of guns is extremely intricate and very difficult to identify.

Civilians are not allowed by law to buy and own guns in Ethiopia. However, the number of people involved in illicit efforts to procure guns is enormous. One of several prevalent methods of procuring guns is smuggling since official personal possession is illegal. Moreover, jungles in the city periphery of Addis Ababa are the busiest places of illegal gun exchange according to the details of Ethiopia’s report draft for the ‘Implementation of the United Nations Program of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects’ (UN, 2005).

Residents of peripheral villages adjacent to the jungles, repeatedly, report to local police about their suspicions of illegal trafficking. However, the police and informed media stayed silent on the issue. This instigated the researcher to assess the role of the police for the security of peripheral residents; and the discernment of illegal gun exchange by vulnerable neighborhood residents. The residents’ trust on the policemen, unrealized impacts behind the illicit exchange of guns and concern of the governor are supposed to be crystal clear.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to show the attitude of peripheral residents to policemen in relation to neighborhood security; and negative impacts of gun shots in the ecological environment.

3. Objectives
The overall aim of this study is to assess the societal derivations\(^4\) to illegal gun trafficking and associated crimes in Kechene area, Addis Ababa. It specifically, Identifies the places and time of illegal gun exchange in the vicinity; explores the roles of police to prevent societal worries related to illicit gun trafficking; and discusses the impressions of the neighborhoods on the illegal gun possession, exchange and potential harms that are more likely to occur.

4. Methods and Limitations
The research used both primary and secondary sources of data. Monograph, reports, books, and articles are used to review secondary data. With regard to collection of empirical data, the study involved police officers working in Gulelle

\(^4\) The researcher uses the term ‘societal derivations’ to affirm that conceptualization of the ‘illegal gun trafficking’, has a root and a proof at the grass root community level. He also believes, ‘illegality’ has to incorporate definition of the people, besides the law.
sub-city⁵ and civil residents. The number of participants was determined based on the time available to the study, and the sufficiency of supplied information for the specified place.

The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants and up on informed consent, they were interviewed for not more than half an hour for every interviewee. Participants were interviewed and their responses were written down in Amharic⁶ and translated into English for the research report. To study the life experience of interviewees, hermeneutic phenomenology was used. This approach was employed since it enables description and meaningful interpretation of the phenomena as it appears. The research was cross-sectional, since data is collected from the interviewees at one point in time.

The researcher discussed illicit gun trafficking in and around the Kebeles⁷ with Police officers to know the attention and concern of police to the issue. In-depth interview was administered to residents in Kechene⁸ Medihaniyalem⁹ -church area who live between the church’s grave yard and the river canyon. These interviewees are selected purposively so that they can give the full picture of what goes on at night in the grave yard compound and the river canyon beside their village.

The study is based on qualitatively analyzed data collected from, geographically, limited respondents. The study does not show longitudinal trends, since the data is gathered at a single point in time. Therefore, it hardly enables to know the national level extent of illicit gun trafficking and forward recommendations on what to be done to eradicate violent crimes that are likely to occur due to illegal gun ownership. Besides, it lacks quantifiable data on the impacts of gunfire pollution that led to residents’ worries. Physical observation by the researcher would also have been one of the crucial means to collect data, but the research lacks it; due to the dangerous and deadly nature of the context and the time that the exchange of guns and gunfire took place.

5. Analysis and Interpretation
The data collected through in-depth interviews and discussions from police officers and local residents are analyzed using thematic approaches. Five themes are generated after careful analysis of responses common to the interviewees; in a way that satisfy the needs of the specified objectives of the research. To avoid the loss of original meaning, the transcribed data were not translated into English until the stage of report writing. To protect the confidentiality of participants Pseudonyms are used.

⁵Gulelle is a sub-city in Addis Ababa- Ethiopia’s capital. This sub-city is adjacent and surrounded by jungles from north, North West and north east parts of the city.
⁶ Amharic is the first language of informants, and national language of the country as well.
⁷ Kebele is the least governmental administrative unit in Ethiopia
⁸ Kechene is name of the uptown part of Gulelle sub-city which is used as a residential village
⁹ Ethiopian Orthodox Church i.e. Holy savior
Places of gun exchange: church graveyard and city jungle

Interviewees of the research explained that the graveyards of Kechene Medahniyalem—church and the river canyon between Shiromeda\textsuperscript{10} and Kechene that is covered by juniper and eucalyptus jungle were centers of illegal gun exchange. Because, respondents briefed that the graveyard of the church was very ‘scary’ and no civilian went to it at night. Hence, it was safe to traffickers to exchange and test the functionality of the gun by free-shooting. According to their information, though the gunfire is audible from far away neither police officers nor a resident dared to go and ask what happened.

Besides, the jungle that is located strategically, had double advantage to illegal traffickers. First, it is out of the reach of people, and second, it absorbs the sound pollution of the gunfire. The illegal exchange and possession of guns is obviously, not an easy task. It required ‘safe’ places to exchange the guns and test the functional status of the gun. Places that are not accessible to people; most preferably jungles that soak up the voices of the gunfire, have been ideal for illegal gun exchanging.

Times of gun exchange: the midnight

Respondents explicitly identified the midnight to be the start of all the topsy-turvy. When everyone is at home, most probably asleep, is very comfortable for the illegal exchange of guns. Because, even if, people of the neighborhood happen to see illicit gun traffickers exchanging or shooting, the actors can hardly be identified in the darkness. As they explained, such sound of the night kind has never been heard during day times in the age of resident interviewees, unless it is the car-tire burst/explosion.

Undoubtedly, it is for the reason that actors of illegal gun exchange can be more obscured at night than the day time that they exchange at night, for the sake of the darkness. The time that respondents usually hear the gunfire is neither a time when civilians move around, nor the policemen had a standby watch to the area. Because, the policemen usually disappear from those places when it is close to midnight.

The roles of police to prevent illicit gun trafficking

The interviewed police officers explained to the researcher that the area had been under a strong control of local police by the coordination of Menen\textsuperscript{11} area police station. Informants told details about the importance of community policing to prevent crime by whistle blowing for the suspects of crime in their neighborhood. According to the police officers, crimes related to spouse abuse, assault, abduction and rape are effectively controlled by the villagers themselves. But, crimes that the

\textsuperscript{10} A condensed residential and commercial village adjacent to Kechene from northeast.

\textsuperscript{11} A residential village in north Addis Ababa was named ‘Menen’ in memory of the Etege Menen—the wife of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, the last king of Ethiopia.
community had not been conscious about, at least until then, like the illicit gun trafficking, were not reported; and police officers admit that it existed. Police officers and a station commander anticipated that not all gun fires heard in the jungle were illegal. They presumed most of them to be the legally arranged trainings of the Addis Ababa police and federal police forces. Nonetheless, their information had no substantial evidences other than their personal guesses. They were also not voluntary to give detailed information about the nature of their mandate and control of the site. They were instead, obsessed with defending the researcher questions on visible and audible issues.

Even though, police officers reported that they had been working to maintain peace and order as much as their resources permit, resident interviewees explained that there were lenient reactions by the police to the illegal gun traffickers. One interviewee spoke it as:

“I think polices are the right people to identify whether the sound is a fired bullet. And I am sure they hear it from where they are, as their camp is near. It rather seems, either the illegal gun exchange is not their security agenda and they do not have attention to it, or the policemen fear to approach the jungle and graveyards at night. Otherwise, the policemen themselves must be part of the illegal gun exchange.”

Respondents briefed that the pollution of gunfire was covertly audible to them and policemen themselves were the professionals to know that was a fired bullet. But, policemen did not have the delving attention. This implies the role of police to prevent illicit gun trafficking in Kechene area had been minimum, if not involved themselves in the business. On the other hand, the government regulations state the security concern of people to be in the due care of the police. Meaning, residents were always fearful of the deadly gunfire a few yards away from their homes. Although, there had not been any reported death in the neighborhoods due to gun traffickers so far, it is not assured it would not occur the next day.

Therefore, strong control of police to the area by the cooperation of residents will be indispensable to eradicate illicit gun trafficking. It also needs the expansion of fundamental infrastructure, especially, electric lights to the jungle and graveyards so that the darkness cannot conceal illegal traffickers; and appropriate roads to easily reach the places, for successful prevention of the crime and assure the prevalence of peace in the village.

**Impressions of the neighborhood**

It has not been uncommon for firewood collectors to find dead hyenas in the jungle as the respondents’ informed the researcher. The respondents believed that not all those deaths of hyenas were by natural cause. It was rather the ruthless reaction of illegal gun traffickers doing it at night, in the time for hyenas to move across the jungle.
Meseret stated the situation as follows:

“I do not doubt the gun sellers and buyers would kill me, if they find me roaming around the jungle while they are testing and exchanging the gun. Because, in my opinion, they use hyenas as testing pads by shooting at them to prove the gun works. Plus, the sellers and buyers in our village are illegal; and they fear police. So, if they see any person unknown to them, they would think they are surrendered. For this reason, the fate of hyenas will inevitably be the same for human beings as well.”

Residents have also acclimatized to getting home as early as before 7:00 pm. Because, coming to home later than that would render one vulnerable to dangers of being accosted by illegal gunners and the angry hyena. Freedom of movement was strictly limited. This has become customary practice and villagers live in silence to what goes around.

The other informant, Admasu told to the researcher that the government deliberately made such gaps and tolerated illegal exchange of guns, so that the affording ones can buy to protect themselves and their property. Because, by law, it is not allowed, or it is a crime to have any kind of firearm or armament for personal purposes, unless it is registered by customs and police, with a legal license. Admasu believed, the problem to get license on hand gun from government is only by official registration. Because, once the gun is registered it would be easy for police to ‘snatch’ it whenever necessary.

Moreover, it is impossible to kill a person by a registered pistol. Because, the police can very easily detect which pistol killed the person. There is also a very limited chance for a poor person to purchase a license for hand gun ownership; it is allowed only for the rich. For these reasons many people, in the respondents’ opinion prefer to possess gun illegally. This enables them to kill their enemy and stay unidentified. Admasu responded as below, had he been in need of having a gun: “I would not need the license if I had the way to have the gun. Because, why? It is just a bar of iron unless it is used to shoot.”

6. Major findings

The church grave yards, the jungle and canyon are avowed illicit gun exchange centers. Gun exchange in these places had a multifold concern to residents. Because, first, it is unsafe to persons to move in the area after the early evening. Residents believe, if traffickers see a person walking around, they may think of him/her as a security agent and could shot him/her, as the exchange is a ‘live or die’ kind of job. Second, these places are, abode of uncounted wildlife, especially for the hyenas at night. These animals are daily found dead in the jungle. Because, traffickers kill them to prove the strength of the gun. In this regard, illegal gun traffickers have been problems, not only for residents, but also to the ecological biodiversity pool.
Public trust of the police in the study site is found to be at the minimum. Here, residents don’t count on the policemen for a sense of ‘security agent’. Interviewed residents considered police forces as brokers and technical inspection experts to the exchanged guns. Though it is difficult to claim that policemen are involved in illicit gun trafficking, it is also problematic to debase the public perception as witnessed. Policemen might have been part of the illicit gun trafficking. This attitude of residents, to a high degree of acceptance, convinces them of the involvement of the police, themselves. Existence of untrusted police, on top of the geopolitical closeness of Ethiopia to the middle-east, is the notable potential for the occurrence of terrorism in the country.

7. CONCLUSION

The illegal exchange and possession of guns has been an intricate process. It involves selected and ‘safe’ place and time to exchange the guns; and test the functional status of the gun. Places which lay people do not easily reach out to; most preferably jungles that soak up the voices of the gunfire, are ideal for illegal gun exchanging, as managed to uncover it in the research site. However, the sound pollution from the gunfire had not been possible to conceal by the traffickers. This has been covert in the current research context for a long period of time.

The societal response to sound pollution of illegal gunfire amidst the night in their neighborhood and the crime of gun trafficking itself have been tenacious concerns for the local residents in places between Kechene and Shiromeda. But, this concern has been vaguely surpassed by police officers. Night time, when everyone is at home is very ‘conducive’ for the illegal exchange of guns; for the reason, all of the sudden, if people of the neighborhood happen to see illicit gun traffickers, the actors can hardly be identified in the darkness.

The Church graveyard of Kechene Medahniyalem is found to be one of the busiest ‘spaces’ for gun sellers and buyers to meet. The cultural myths associated to graveyards prevented individuals for any visit when they heard the sound of gunfire besides intuitive fears, and this in turn fostered the chance of gun traffickers to use the place as a center. The large area of the graveyard enabled shooting handguns to prove their functional statuses.

The residents view the situation as if it was normal. They even think that is the gun market which the government does not want to talk about. Because, the government on one hand, gives some segment of the population the rights to have licensed and registered guns; and on the other hand, it is vague from where to find and buy the gun. However, illegal gun exchange has created fear in the residents; limited people’s right to free movement; and embarrassed others in many respects.

The death of hyenas in everyday night in the jungle and the graveyard is believed to be the gun traffickers’ shot. This creates fear in people to go to the site and ask
what happened. Therefore, being illegal, the act of gun exchange is deadly in the midnight time with almost null assistance from police.

Generally, the graveyard of Kechene Medahniyalem church and the juniper and eucalyptus jungle across the river canyon between Kechene and Shiromeda are found to be the illegal gun exchange belts. The midnight time when people are most likely to sleep and policemen disappear is the peak time of the gunfire. Residents in the village where illegal gun trafficking took place have negative impressions to it, albeit, they thought the government gave it the least attention.

References


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