



Issue Backgrounder

13952 Denver West Parkway • Suite 400 • Golden, Colorado 80401
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Human Rights Atrocities: *The Consequences of United Nations Gun Confiscation in East Africa*

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By David B. Kopel, Paul Gallant, and Joanne D. Eisen

On June 26, the United Nations convened a major conference on gun control. Before demanding further control, the delegates ought to insist that the United Nations halt the use of torture, arson, and murder in the carrying-out of existing U.N. gun control programs.

With United Nations support, the governments of Kenya and Uganda are attempting to confiscate all arms from the pastoral tribes of the Kenya-Uganda borderlands. The “forcible disarmament” campaign has displaced tens and tens of thousands of people, turning them into starving refugees.

United Nations gun control is the cause of a massive humanitarian crisis in East Africa.

The United Nations and some NGOs relentlessly promote the theme that gun ownership is contrary to human rights.¹ Yet the UN and the NGOs are too often silent about the extreme human rights

violations which are currently being perpetrated as a result of the UN gun control campaign.

United Nations gun control is the cause of a massive humanitarian crisis in East Africa. Any new United Nations Programme of Action on small arms should include concrete measures to ensure that U.N. gun control does not lead directly to rape, pillage, murder, and de facto ethnic cleansing.

Kenya

Prasad Kariyawasam, the Sri Lankan chair of the U.N. conference, says that the conference “does not in any way address legal possession.” The statement is meant to be re-assuring to American gun owners, but, in practice, the statement simply means that gun confiscation will be implemented once the U.N. has succeeded in getting national governments to eliminate the legal ownership of firearms. For example, UNESCO and UNICEF funded the supporters of the October 2005 referendum in Brazil which would have outlawed citizen firearms possession.

In Kenya, the existence of a gun licensing program creates the legal fiction that law-abiding Kenyan citizens can possess a firearm. But [in reality](#), “Very few Kenyan citizens, especially those living in remote areas, meet the criteria for a gun license and can afford to pay the associated fees.”² In the Daily Nation, Peter Mwaura explained “In practice, however, only the rich and the socially or politically correct or well connected manage to obtain firearms certificates and keep them... Thus the gun law can be pretty arbitrary and subjective in its application.”

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Ordinary Kenyans are not even allowed to possess bows and arrows, and the bow and arrow laws are also applied discriminatorily.³

Among the pastoralists of the Kenya/Uganda borderlands, [many households have firearms](#), and the crime rate is low, although there is a substantial problem of violence between tribes and clans, especially in cattle-raiding. Estimates of the pastoralists' gun stock range from 50,000 to 200,000 in Kenya, and 50,000 to 150,000 in Uganda.⁴

Yet even the worst inter-tribal cattle-raiding violence is exceeded by the violence of the gun confiscation programs. According to the Kenyan newspaper *The Standard*, "Internal Security minister Mirugi Kariuki said the Government would stop at nothing to recover the arms."⁵ West Pokot area District Commissioner Stephen Ikua [warned](#) "We shall use force to get them."⁶

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Internal Security minister John Michuki, giving the police free rein against the populace. "The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights cautioned Kenyans to brace themselves for a killing field if police officers were to effect the order."⁷

Extreme brutality in the enforcement of gun prohibition is nothing new in Kenya. A gun confiscation program which the military conducted in 1950 caused the deaths of 50 people, while the government confiscated 10,000 head of cattle.⁸

In 1961, then-Lieutenant Colonel Idi Amin of the King's African Rifles in the then-British colony of Uganda crossed the border into Kenya and tortured and terrorized members of the Turkana tribe who refused to give up their weapons. At least 127 men were castrated and left to die.⁹

The failed 1984 "Operation NYUNDO" [Operation Hammer] was a brutal example of the difficulty of disarming civilians who would rather risk death than surrender their ability to protect their families.¹⁰

"Operation NYUNDO" was a collaborative effort of the Kenyan and Ugandan armies—as are the current gun confiscation programs in those countries.

Krop Muroto, a political activist, recalled: "No one knows to date how many people were killed in that operation that lasted three months. The community was further devastated by mass killing of their cattle. 20,000 head of cattle were confiscated, rounded up in sheds and starved to death. Among other atrocities...the army used helicopter gunships, killed people and destroyed a lot of property."¹¹

A May 11, 2006, article by Reuters reported:

"Lopokoy Kolimuk, an elder in the dusty and dry village of Kanyarkwat in the West Pokot district, said the soldiers who carried out that mission were "wild, beyond humanity." He said many shot Pokots on sight, or forced men to lie on the ground in a line as they ran across their backs. Other men had their testicles tied together and were then made to run away from each other, he said. Women were raped in front of their husbands, sometimes with empty beer bottles."¹²

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The atrocities in 1950, 1961, and 1984 were not committed as part of a United Nations program. Surely the contemporary gun confiscation program, being conducted at the wishes of the United Nations, would show respect for human rights?

To the contrary, in April 2006, Security Minister John Michuki told Parliament, "The Government has decided to disarm the Pokot by force. If they want an experience of 1984 when the Government used force to disarm them, then this is precisely what is going to happen."¹³

Stephen Ikua, a government representative, said that threats were necessary in order to get civilians to peacefully surrender their firearms. He said: “As a government, you should talk from a position of strength. You cannot come in saying you are going to respect human rights.”¹⁴

On May 4, 2006, the BBC described the latest military operation in Kenya, code-named “Okota” [Collect], utilizing tanks, trucks, helicopters, and a local school building as barracks for the army. In

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the village of about 2,000 people, 8 weapons were recovered by the intimidation.¹⁵ Fearing a repeat of the 1984 human rights violations that accompanied disarmament, 15,000 panicked people fled to Uganda with their cattle and guns, leaving behind the aged, infirm, and the children.¹⁶

The Standard reported on May 18:

“Starvation and anguish are now stalking West Pokot residents,

since the Government launched a forcible disarmament exercise a month ago....The residents now say they have resigned themselves to fate and have become refugees in their own country....A recent visit by The Standard revealed the sense of hopelessness and vulnerability that the disarmament has brought, forcing majority residents to relocate to Uganda. Schools have also become ghost institutions, with very few pupils....Although the Government says the operation has not disrupted the villagers’ normal life, a spot-check reveals otherwise.”¹⁷

In West Pokot alone, 120,000 people need food aid, but only half are getting rations. Schooling is disrupted, and farmsteads are being neglected.¹⁸

Five weeks after the forced disarmament program began, seventy illegally possessed firearms had been recovered.¹⁹ Apparently, a few dozen firearms are reason enough for the Kenyan government to go to war against its own citizenry.

Uganda

In 1970, Uganda’s Firearms Act imposed national firearm registration and gun-owner licensing under exceedingly stringent requirements. In practice, the law was used to make it illegal for anyone to have a firearm, except persons deemed politically correct by the dictatorship of Milton Obote.

A year later, Army Chief of Staff Idi Amin wrested control of the country in a military coup. The ensuing genocide of the Amin regime was perpetrated against a populace whose primitive armaments did not approach the effectiveness of the killer government. By the time the genocide ended in 1979, the estimated toll was 300,000 slaughtered Ugandans, the [Karamojong](#) tribespeople suffering a disproportionately higher percentage at about 30,000 tribespersons.²⁰

The ensuing genocide of the Amin regime was perpetrated against a populace whose primitive armaments did not approach the effectiveness of the killer government.

In response to Amin’s murderous rule, the Karamojong began fabricating [their own guns](#), fashioning gun barrels from the steel tubing of metal furniture.²¹ These homemade guns were then used tactically to acquire better and more powerful ones by attacking isolated police outposts where acquisition would not be terribly costly in terms of tribal lives. When the Amin government was toppled and his army fled, military firearms were traded, sold, or lost along the way to local tribesmen, who also found easy access to now-deserted weapons depots.

Obote was restored to power in 1979, after Amin attacked Tanzania, and was toppled by the Tanzanian army. Obote again began to attempt to disarm the Karamojong. His efforts were forcefully repelled. The Karamojong had learned that cows and guns are equally indispensable: a person needs a gun immediately at hand to protect one’s herd. The most-armed tribes fared the best.

Defeating Obote and seizing power in 1986, President Yoweri Museveni reconstituted his rebel

forces as the new national army. Like his predecessors, Museveni attempted to subdue the Karamojong. In *Africa Studies Quarterly*, Michael Quam explains that “the soldiers misbehaved, bullying people and looting stores, and generally convincing the Karimojong that their only protection from men with guns lay in keeping guns themselves.”²² The Ugandan government’s coercive disarmament efforts met with so much resistance that Museveni let the matter drop in 1989.

But Museveni started a new gun confiscation program at the behest of the United Nations. When a voluntary gun surrender program expired in Uganda on February 15, 2002, and only a disappointing 7,676 guns were collected, President Museveni turned up the heat. The U.N. Integrated Regional Information Network announced that “the forcible disarmament operation will involve the use of ‘police meth-

ods’....”²³ What the U.N. delicately called “police methods” might more precisely be termed “Gestapo methods.”

The UPDF (the Ugandan army, or Uganda People’s Defence Forces) rampaged, beating and torturing Ugandans, and raping and looting at will, all the while using firearm confiscation to justify the violence.

On March 21, 2002, Father Declan O’Toole, a member of the Mill Hill Missionaries in Uganda, and

his companions were [executed](#) by UPDF soldiers because O’Toole asked the army to be “less aggressive” in the disarmament campaign.²⁴ The murderers were apprehended and their death sentence was carried out within days, before they could appeal it—and also before they could reveal who had given them the order. Just one week after O’Toole’s murder, *New Vision* reported the death of an expectant mother who “died of injuries sustained when a soldier kicked her in the stomach during forceful disarmament.” The article also noted the “Complaints of torturing civilians by the UPDF.”²⁵

Museveni’s answer was to blame the victim Karamojong, whose torture by the army was the basis for O’Toole’s complaint. Museveni “said the best way to stop such incidents in [the] future is for the Karimojong to hand in their guns to eliminate any justification for the UPDF operations in the vil-lages.”²⁶

By May 2002, [reports](#) of fierce resistance from the remaining armed Karamojong began to trickle out, despite government attempts to suppress knowl-edge of that resistance and of the army’s brutality. For example, in Kotido, on May 16, the Ugandan army engaged armed civilians and recovered about 30 rifles. Thirteen civilians and two soldiers died, an average of one death for each two guns confiscated.²⁷

“After many homes were bombed and crops were destroyed, tribesmen fled across the border to Kenya. About 80,000 people were internally displaced.”²⁹ The Catholic Church charged that thousands of residents of Karamoja were turned into refugees after their homes were torched by UPDF troops in the disarmament campaign. By mid-July, the total number of confiscated guns had reached 10,000—only about 25 percent of the expected total.

Disarmed civilians were preyed upon by those who still had weapons. Kenyans who had credulously sur-rendered their guns were not rewarded with tranquility, but instead found themselves especially vulner-able. As *New Vision* had earlier [reported](#), “Most of the people whose cows were taken” in a raid in the recently disarmed Bokora district, “had handed in their guns to the government in the on-going disar-mament exercise.”³⁰

In May 2006, at least nine more civilians and three soldiers were killed in “forceful disarmament” opera-tions which seized a few dozen guns. Non-govern-ment organizations which support voluntary Ugandan disarmament, have, speaking anonymously, [called](#) the

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army's forcible program "very cruel", because of its "endangering the lives of people."²⁸

Ben Knighton, presenting a [paper](#) at an Oxford University conference, reported a damning list of human rights abuses which constitute the disarmament program. He commented: "Without guns any

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Knighton [charged](#) that the violence was "due to an escalation in raiding directly stimulated by a disarmament programme," and that even that degree of violence

among the pastoralists may be overstated by gun prohibition activists and the Ugandan government.³² He [noted](#) that, in Karamoja, although there is a lack of medical reporting, making precise figures unavailable: "With 130 gunshot-wounds being treated a year in both the main hospitals (0.35 [wounds] per thousand), it is small beer compared with 22,000 murders in South Africa in 2000 (0.51 [deaths] per thousand). This analysis is directly counter to alarmist international aid views, 'the source of modern violence in Karamoja is automatic weaponry'."³³

In sum, Knighton warns that if the Ugandan forced disarmament program "succeeds it will accomplish the ethnocide of the nomadic pastoralist culture...if not their genocide."³⁴

The First Step to Reform

On June 28, 2006, the *Washington Post* published an Associated Press [report](#) that the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) had sent a letter to the Ugandan government on June 26, announcing the halt of U.N. financial assistance for the disarmament program in Karamoja. The letter noted the "killings, beatings, arbitrary detention, intimidation and harassment" perpetrated by Ugandan "security" forces.

The U.N.'s action is laudable, and should be applauded by all human rights supporters.

This is the first time that the United Nations has ever criticized human rights abuses in a disarmament program. It would have been better, of course, if the entire international community had taken much stronger action starting in 2002, when it became clear what the Ugandan army was doing in Karamoja. Instead, tens of thousands of Ugandans were turned into refugees, their villages burned, and their livelihood destroyed by the disarmament program.

Thus far, the United Nations has remained silent about the similar human rights abuses being perpetrated by Kenya's disarmament program.

Predictably, the Ugandan government's speech to the U.N. gun control conference did not even mention the UNDP letter, and offered no indication that Uganda would make any changes in its program of ethnocide by disarmament.

While this Issue Backgrounder has focused on Kenya and Uganda, they are not the only nations where disarmament has directly led to the violations of international human rights. Guns in the wrong hands are a global problem, and so are human rights violations caused by forced disarmament in nations such as Zimbabwe, Bougainville, Cambodia, and Albania—and perhaps many others, where suppression of the free press has prevented the world from learning the full scope of other human rights abuses.

Conclusion

Quite clearly, the leading source of modern violence and human rights violations in the Kenya-Uganda border is the gun confiscation program.

Speaking to the United Nations small arms conference on June 27, 2006, Cyrus T. Gituai, Permanent Secretary, Provincial Administration/Internal Security, Office of the President of Kenya, claimed that arms "transfers fanned violence, eroded human

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development and seriously undermined peace efforts.”³⁵

In truth, it is the arms “transfers” (that is, confiscations) perpetrated by the Kenyan and Ugandan governments, and the arms which other nations have transferred to the abusive Kenyan and Ugandan militaries which are fanning violence, eroding development, and destroying the peace.

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Both Kenyan and Ugandan governments state that their gun confiscation programs are carrying out the wishes of the United Nations, pursuant to the Nairobi Protocol, an East Africa treaty banning unlicensed gun possession (in practice, banning all gun possession by anyone except the ruling elites). The Nairobi Protocol is a result of the U.N.’s “Programme of Action”

from the previous major U.N. conference on gun control, in 2001.

IANSA (International Action Network on Small Arms) is the world’s leading international gun prohibition group; its staff members are serving as delegates for some nations at the 2006 gun control conference, and one of its members, professor Barbara Frey, is the U.N.’s Special Rapporteur on guns and human rights. The organization has been inappropriately reticent about the Kenya and Uganda atrocities, praising the governmental actions with the euphemism of “forced disarmament.”³⁶

Many human rights activists correctly point out that guns in the wrong hands can be used to violate human rights, such as the guns possessed by the genocidal janjaweed Arab tribal gangsters in Darfur, which are armed and supported by the government of Sudan, or the terrorist Lord’s Resistance Army in Sudan and Uganda. Similarly, the guns in the hands of the Kenyan and Ugandan governments are a major cause of human rights abuses today in the Kenya-Uganda borderlands.

The proper program of action is clear for human rights activists whose top priority is human rights (as opposed to self-proclaimed “human rights” supporters whose real priority is gun confiscation regardless of human rights): genuine human rights activists should work to ensure that all disarmament campaigns, especially those undertaken pursuant to U.N. efforts, meet the same high standards of adherence of human rights as would be expected of any other government campaign.

As a result, disarmament campaigns would generally be voluntary—supported by public education and financial rewards—and would not be coercive.

Arile Lomerinyang, a former tribal warrior in Kenya, traveled to New York City to present a gun control petition. Yet even he rejects what the Kenyan government is doing. According to *The East African*, “he says the Kenya government is going about the whole [disarmament] exercise the wrong way. ‘It won’t yield any fruit. Local residents, especially the the Pokots, were never consulted. The government assumed the big-boss mentality by not inviting our leaders for any discussions’...”

“He went further to accuse the government of using excessive force and acting at the behest of foreigners. He claims some residents have fled to Uganda to escape the forced disarmament. Those left behind have hidden their firearms. ‘Very few weapons, if any, will be recovered. It is an exercise in futility.’”³⁷

Supporters of human rights can have legitimate disagreements about the circumstances when disarmament will genuinely advance human rights. But no sincere advocate of human rights can dispute that the

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Kenya/Uganda program of “forced disarmament” is a massive human rights atrocity, an evil program that must be condemned by the international community just as forcefully as any other government program which produces so much cruelty—wanton murder, rape, torture, arson, and turning so many innocent men, women, and children into starving refugees.

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JON CALDARA is President of the Independence Institute.

DAVID B. KOPEL is Research Director at the Independence Institute.

PAUL GALLANT is a Senior Fellow at the Independence Institute.

JOANNE D. EISEN is a Senior Fellow at the Independence Institute.

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Endnotes

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