

Security For The Highest Bidder

Shoddy policing for the many, costly private protection for the few

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Private guards in Uganda: Only those who can afford to pay have access to such security services.

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Outside an imposing residence in Runda, an upscale residential area in Nairobi, Kenya, two men in black-and-orange uniforms stand guard. They work for Group 4 Security, a private security firm. A few feet away a patrol car idles. Its radio communication systems are patched into an alarm centre in the city and to an identical car parked near a police station two miles away. The patrol cars are there to ensure the police respond as soon as an alarm is raised.

Fifteen miles away in the lower-income area of Jericho, there are no uniformed security guards or patrol cars. Police response is slow or absent and crimes such as armed robbery are common. So too is vigilante violence against suspected criminals.

Such contrasts are not limited to Nairobi. The dual reality — little public police protection for the majority of citizens and much better costly security for the

wealthy few — is common all over Africa.

Ensuring the security of people and their property is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of a well-functioning state. It is traditionally the job of the national police forces. However, Africa's police are woefully understaffed. The United Nations recommends one police officer for every 450 citizens. Kenya has one for every 1,150, Tanzania one for every

1,298, and Ghana one for every 1,200.

Most police forces are also underfunded and poorly equipped. Officers are often short on vehicles and fuel, making them routinely late or unable to respond to crimes. Inadequate funds also translate into poor pay, low morale

and rampant corruption, all of which hamper the ability to provide adequate public security.

Increasingly, private security companies are plugging the gap. Given the state of Africa's official police forces, the growth of private firms appears to be a timely and viable solution. But regional

experts urge caution. They point out that poor regulation of such companies can worsen corruption and encourage the diversion of public police vehicles and skills to the protection of those who can pay. Governments need to strengthen their capacity to provide better public security for everyone, the experts argue.

Weak, Feared And Corrupt

In a July 2008 report on private and public security in Uganda, Solomon Kirunda, a researcher for the South African-based Institute of Security Studies (ISS), notes that

“a functioning police force of any nation state is expected to be principally involved with maintaining security [and the] prevention and detection of

crime.” To do that, police forces need resources and political impartiality.



Office of a police commander in Maputo, Mozambique: Many public police forces in Africa have few vehicles and little equipment to help protect citizens, and when they do, they are often feared because of their brutality or corruption.

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Historically African police units were tools of colonial repression, Adedeji Ebo, who oversees the security sector reform team in the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, told *Africa Renewal*. Only a few countries have successfully transformed their police into service institutions. “That is a fundamental deficit about policing in Africa,” Mr. Ebo

observes. “Rather than being associated with safety, the uniform is often seen as a source of fear and oppression, abuse and extortion.”

Weak public administration is another problem, Mr. Ebo adds. In the two decades between the 1980s and early 2000s fiscal austerity measures forced many

governments to reduce their spending on law enforcement. Reduced spending coincided with declining economic prosperity and with migration to the cities, where urban poverty and overcrowding made for more crime.

Although economic performance subsequently improved, police officers in Africa have remained

badly paid. Poor conditions of service mean that the police generally cannot attract quality recruits. Professionalism is largely absent and extortion and corruption thrive as officers seek to augment meager wages.

In 2009 Kenya's police force topped the list of the most corrupt

East African institutions compiled by the local chapter of Transparency International, a global anti-corruption advocacy group headquartered in Berlin. The Tanzanian police came in second. In fact, since Transparency International Kenya began conducting surveys on the issue in 2001, the Kenyan police force has

consistently headed its list of the country's "most corrupt" institutions. According to another Kenyan anti-corruption organization, the Mars Group, the recruitment, deployment and promotion of Kenyan police are often subject to political and other forms of patronage rather than being based on merit

Not Just Numbers

Not all African countries struggle to provide enough police. Nigeria has more than 370,000 police officers and a police-to-citizen ratio of 1 to 400, which more than meets the UN's recommended figure. Paradoxically, say Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams, researchers at the University of Wales, Nigerian

society "is over-policed and under-secured."

Ms. Abrahamsen and Mr. Williams noted in a 2005 report that although there are "many police officers" prominently stationed in the "crime-prone streets of Lagos" and the insurgency-affected Niger Delta, the officers are "often

unable to enforce law and order." Nigeria's problem, they noted, is not a lack of officers. More often than not the police are themselves a significant source of insecurity, since they are "often engaged in criminal activities — particularly corruption and extortion." Nigeria's police are also feared for their excessive use of force.



Neighborhood vigilante group in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: Some communities pay local youths to protect them, but sometimes such vigilante groups engage in criminal activities themselves.

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According to Mr. Ebo, extensive reform is needed to address the shortcomings of African police forces and to achieve professionalism, enhance capacity and improve effectiveness. "Strong oversight of police institutions is necessary," he says. "But most important is for people to feel that they have a part to play in that oversight and that the police is an

institution over which they have control."

Similarly, ISS researchers argue for a review of the laws governing police actions and for reforms in recruitment, promotion and accountability procedures. Police forces also need to be politically independent and well funded.

Although governments routinely assist each other with such reforms, the UN can only provide assistance at the request of the government of the country or if the Security Council or General Assembly determines that international assistance is required, usually when a country needs to rebuild after conflict. Police reform is increasingly accepted as an important priority in post-

conflict countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

However, in countries not experiencing conflict, governments are often reluctant to invite

international organizations to look into what they regard as sensitive internal security matters.

Turning To The Private Sector

As the gap between the population's need for security and the ability of state institutions to provide it has grown, wealthier citizens have turned to the private sector. As a result, the number of private security companies has mushroomed. In Nigeria some 1,500 to 2,000 security firms employ about 100,000 people. Kenya has about 2,000 companies. One, the KK Guards, operates not just in Kenya but also in Tanzania, Uganda, southern Sudan, Rwanda and the eastern DRC. Security

officers in private firms are often much better equipped than the national police, with vehicles, radio alarm systems and rapid-response capacity.

Ironically, except in a few countries like South Africa, Uganda and Angola, private security officers are not allowed to bear arms. So when a private security firm wants police at its clients' homes or offices, the firms have to call in a public response.

Researchers have found that security firms in the DRC, Kenya and other countries informally "hire" police officers to accompany their patrol vehicles. At first glance such cooperation may appear to help both the police and security firms bridge the gaps in capacity. However, as researchers have pointed out, such partnerships can actually reduce public security, given the weaknesses in Africa's police institutions.

Privatization Of Public Policing

In an ISS study on private security in the DRC, researcher Mieke Goede found that with the advent of private security firms, the Congolese police, rather than working on internal reform to strengthen their ability to provide services, had increasingly "sought to enter the commercial security market." In 2003 an agreement between the police and private security companies allowed the firms to incorporate armed police into their teams to conduct hybrid patrols and guard operations and to respond jointly to alarms.

The contracts, usually drawn up with a local police department, typically include substantial payments by the private firms. "It is unlikely that these informal incomes contribute to the general police budget," Mr. Goede said. "Rather the money is most likely to disappear into the private pockets of the commanders of the police departments with whom the contracts are signed."

Police officers sent to work with private firms also get "bonuses" of between \$25 and \$50 per month from the firm, a figure higher than most officers' salaries, which range from \$20 to \$40 a month. Goede observed that some companies "even pay 'their' policemen a similar salary to their own employees ... \$100 to \$150," and consider them "their employees, rather than state elements on loan. Such police officers ... can be replaced at the [security] company's request."

In Nigeria, Ms. Abrahamsen and Mr. Williams note, the "privatization of public policing" is most extensive in the oil sector, where insurgency and illegal oil siphoning cost the country and oil companies billions of dollars. To address the problem the Nigerian police force trains and deploys additional unarmed officers to guard corporate facilities. Such officers are paid and controlled by the companies. The researchers

found that Shell employs 1,200 such officers, ExxonMobil over 700 and Chevron approximately 250. In addition, oil companies routinely rely on the heavily armed state paramilitary police (MOPOL) to secure their operations. Shell also uses over 600 armed police and MOPOL officers.

"Virtually all levels of public force, including the military, have been integrated into the day-to-day security arrangements of the oil industry to a degree where it is often difficult to determine where public policing ends and private security begins," the researchers note.

The use of public police forces to provide private security for the oil companies could be interpreted as a government effort to secure national income, since oil is the major revenue-earner for the economy. But major questions arise about the way Nigerian police forces go about playing this role.

Corruption

The arrangements, report Ms. Abrahamsen and Mr. Williams, provide opportunities for corruption. In the oil company payments for the police officers, say the researchers, “no receipts are given and prices also appear to vary somewhat between companies and contracts.” Moreover, the funds generally do not go into the public coffers but instead to individual high-ranking officers and to officials assigned to work with the private security companies. They estimate that acquiring the “initial permission from the inspector general to utilize MOPOL officers” costs the equivalent of \$800. Then the equivalent of \$335 goes to each unit and station commander. Another \$13 is allocated for each MOPOL officer per 12-hour shift, paid to the unit commander, plus a \$2 supplement for food.

As such examples show, the involvement of public officials in private security dealings in Nigeria, Kenya, the DRC and other countries has become a highly profitable source of additional income for senior police commanders and officers fortunate enough to be deployed with a security firm. Such activities create wide income differences within the police force, generate cutthroat competition for the more profitable jobs and erode overall morale. There are also questions of undue political influence, since some high-ranking government and military officials in countries such as the DRC, Angola and Liberia reportedly own security firms. The irregular nature of such activities is not only “highly corrupt,” Mr. Goede notes. It also “debilitates the public security forces.”

But the most dangerous result, Mr. Goede continues, is that police officers working in such a commercialized atmosphere ultimately lose the incentive to serve the public. Instead, they increasingly see security as a commodity for which the public should pay. Such an attitude, he comments, “depreciates the functioning of the police as public protector.”

The very existence of security forces that individuals and companies can access only for a fee diminishes people’s already low expectations of state institutions. It further reduces the legitimacy of already weak governments in the eyes of their citizens.

Out Of The Public Domain

Many experts agree that the worst problem with such irregular, corrupt and unregulated “partnerships” between private and public security institutions is that they remove public resources (the police, their arms and legitimacy) from the public domain, where citizens theoretically have a right to access them for free. They are deployed instead to the private arena, where

they become available only for those who can afford to pay.

According to Sabelo Gumedze, a defense researcher for South Africa’s ISS, official security services are virtually “nonexistent” for many poor people in Africa. This reduces their overall well-being. As the “wealthy barricade themselves behind higher security walls and install increasingly

advanced alarm systems, crime moves to the poorer neighborhoods, where the ‘pickings’ may be less enriching, but more accessible,” Mr. Gumedze explains. Inevitably, he says, the inadequately policed poor areas, especially in town centers, become the most “insecure and violent, [and] this further robs the already marginalized urban poor of a good quality of life.”

Vigilantes And Gangs

In a 2007 report on private security companies and human security in Africa, Mr. Gumedze and fellow ISS researcher Deane-Peter Baker pointed to another

disturbing trend. As African states fail to provide protection for their citizens, the population is impelled to organize in other ways to ensure their own safety. As a result, the

two researchers warn, the role of public security enforcer is increasingly being filled by “vigilante groups and other militias that have had the ability to provide

the services that the state is not able to provide.”

For poor citizens, such non-state formations are often the cheapest and most reliable form of protection. However, over time some vigilante groups, such as the so-called Taliban and Kamjesh in Kenya or the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria, have themselves evolved into criminal organizations and extortion rings.

Security concerns are also high in countries like Uganda and Angola where private security providers are allowed to carry arms, since such weapons can be used to for criminal purposes. Mr. Kirunda of the ISS blames this on the poor monitoring and enforcement of laws prescribing safe storage of arms and prohibiting off-duty officers from carrying weapons. Moreover, the presence of former military or police officers in such heavily armed private services could potentially foster wider insecurity if the services become

politicized or grow so powerful that they escape control.

Angola, Sierra Leone and the DRC have laws intended to ensure that such things do not happen. In Kenya, a proposed bill to bar members of the armed forces and the National Security Intelligence Service from running security companies and to require ex-military and police to get clearance before registering a firm has languished in parliament for years. As the UN’s Mr. Ebo notes, the weakness of state institutions makes creating such laws difficult. Even where there are laws and mechanisms for enforcement, “individuals find ways to beat the law,” he told *Africa Renewal*.

Without adequate security, fostering broad economic growth or achieving the UN’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) becomes difficult. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon pointed out in a 2008 report that “longer-term development demands a sufficient degree of security to facilitate

poverty reduction and economic growth.”

However, police and other security sector reforms cannot be imposed on governments. As Susan van der Merwe, the South African deputy foreign minister, told the Security Council in May 2009, reforming security institutions in African countries is a “process that requires continuous attention and political will. It is a process that is politically sensitive and that must be nationally owned.”

Towards that end, civil society and community organizations have a key role to play. The Centre for Law Enforcement Education (CLEEN) in Nigeria and the Mars Group in Kenya are seeking to generate public support for security reforms and pressing their governments to act. They provide the public with information about the role of the police and lobby national leaders to make the changes needed to ensure that police forces serve the population better.

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