The Role of guns in the violence in South Sudan

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By Steve Paterno

December 16, 2012 - Last week, in commemoration of Human Rights Day, I was interviewed by Radio France International (RFI) so as to highlight the issues of human rights abuses in South Sudan. The interview was as timely as it was necessary. The increase of violent killings in Juba and around South Sudan is acknowledged by the country's Minister of Interior Alison Manani Magaya, in his interview with Miraya FM. In recent months, South Sudan has experienced spike of violence attributed to armed perpetrators, like no other before. It is estimated that in Juba alone, at least one person dies as a result of gun shoot everyday. The example include a recent high profile murder ofIsaiah Abraham, who is a former army major, a senior civil servant and an online columnists; commenting on political issues affecting South Sudan. This high profile murder of Isaiah Abraham followed by indiscriminate killing of a peaceful and unarmed demonstrators in Wau town, who were protesting against state government decision of trying to displace the headquarters of Wau county outside the town. Such killing was proceeded by inter-ethnic conflicts such as in Lake state, which left scores dead.

The questions and comments posted to me from those who listened to my interview in relation to guns as the factor playing a major role in violence, compelled me to further expand on this subject of guns and violence.

South Sudan is flooded with guns as a result of decades of arms struggle. Today, in South Sudan, guns remain the most single instruments beside diseases, which snatch lives instantaneously and at a very high rate. In the hands of civilians, guns are responsible for the death of many lives, used for stealing properties of others as well as it is a source of intimidation. Equally devastating are guns in the hands of trigger happy security services as they tend to use it indiscriminately in targeting innocent civilians with awful precision and deadly results.

Last year, when they carry out weapons search in certain section of Juba, the capital of South Sudan, several guns were turned out, among the residence of Juba. The irony of this is that, the SPLA issued order, banning the wearing of uniform as well as carrying of the gun among those soldiers who are not on duty. However, most of the crimes committed within Juba are by people wearing uniform and brandishing guns. Obviously, the SPLA failed in enforcing its own order. This is typical of having the rules only in paper, without enforcing mechanism.

Outside Juba, the civilians enjoy their guns in inflicting death among their kinds. In responding to such incidents, the soldiers employed punitive measures, often going on rampant killings among civilians, suspected of armed violence. The real perpetrators of such violence are often escaped unscathed, both from civilians and the army side. The government policy in curbing guns violence is a cosmetic disarmament program. This disarmament is often goes horrible. First, the disarmament is only carried out on some section of the communities, allegedly involved in the armed violence. Those disarmament are characterized with abuses from the security personnel against communities. The most recent and widely cited example is the case of Murle tribe, where the soldiers assigned to disarm the Murle, ended up killing, raping and looting the innocent civilians among the Murle community. Worst yet, the very soldiers who carry out the disarmament among the civilians are the very ones who supplied those civilians with the weapons. For example, in the war against Murle and Lou Nuer, Small Arms Survey research is able to prove that both groups are supplied by arms from SPLA. This validate the point that SPLA commanders and soldiers are responsible for the supply of the arms to the civilians, the point which is actually acknowledged by most officials in the government. Also responsible, are Khartoum regime, for supplying militias in South Sudan with weapons so as to disestablish the country. Foreign agents are even taking advantage of the worsening situation, by killing people in and around Juba town.

So, guns are the major contributing factors in the South Sudan insecurity. The government has no formula yet in handling the problem. The best the government can do is to provide a blanket security to all the communities. Security for all will compel the use of guns irrelevant, because all the citizens will feel at peace provided by the government. However, with the prevalence of insecurity today, everyone feels, owning the gun is the answer—people taking laws into their own hands, the survival of the fittest. With such insecurity today in South Sudan, even government officials are recruiting bodyguards outside government institutions for their own safeguards. In the end, there is no government as a body and an institution, but a bunch of individuals roaming around with wielding guns. South Sudan, a country with rich history for struggle for freedom and independence, is being turned into a warlordism; a country run by a bunch of individual, showing the strengths of arms.