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SANDF Control of the Northern and Eastern Border Areas of South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Borderline control and security were historically the responsibility of the South African Police (SAP) until the withdrawal of the counterinsurgency units at the end of 1990. The Army has maintained a presence on the borders in significant numbers since the 1970s. In the Interim Constitution of 1993, borderline functions were again allocated to the South African Police Service (SAPS). However, with the sharp rise in crime in the country and the subsequent extra burden this placed on the police, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) was placed in service by the president to assist and support the SAPS with crime prevention, including assistance in borderline security. As a result, the SANDF had a strong presence with 28 infantry companies and five aircraft deployed on the international borders of South Africa at the time.¹

An agreement was signed on 10 June 1998 between the SANDF and the SAPS that designated the responsibility for borderline protection to the SANDF. In terms of this agreement, as contained in a cabinet memorandum, the SANDF has formally been requested to patrol the borders of South Africa. This is to ensure that the integrity of borders is maintained by preventing the unfettered movement of people and goods across the South African borderline between border posts. The role of the SANDF has been defined technically as one of support to the SAPS and other departments to combat crime as requested.² In practice, however, the SANDF patrols without the direct support of the other departments.

Currently, there are 13 infantry companies present along the land borders of South Africa, with approximately 1 742 soldiers deployed to prevent the illegal flow and movement of people, vehicles, arms and drugs across (infiltrate and exfiltrate) South Africa's land borders. Comparing these deployment figures to figures for 1993/1994 (3 752 soldiers and 28 companies), a drastic decrease becomes clear with a reduction in numbers of soldiers deployed by 2 010. The SANDF soldiers now have to do the same work, but with less resources. In addition, they still have to play a supportive role to a declining number of police officers at South Africa's international border posts.³ The reduction in human and other resources is mainly due to the ever-decreasing budget for these functions. The deployment of these soldiers also does not occur evenly along the entire land border of South Africa, but only at selected 'flashpoint' or priority areas on the border. In some areas, only limited police presence is available at the border post itself, leaving vast areas of the borderline unprotected.

Field research undertaken for this paper originally aimed to focus on the illegal movement of firearms across South Africa's international borders. However, it was difficult to separate the issue of firearms from that of illegal immigration or even vehicle crimes and drug-trafficking.

This paper examines the areas of responsibility of different SANDF groups, the available resources, illegal crossing points and the recorded seizures of firearms. Some remarks by the SANDF are offered on the smuggling of arms in the Northern Province and Mpumalanga.

REGIONAL JOINT TASK FORCE: NORTH

Structure

The Regional Joint Task Force: North (RJTFN) is situated in Pietersburg. It acts as the headquarters of the operational deployment of all SANDF forces in the area of operations and is commanded by a major-general.

The RJTFN is subdivided into areas, each under the operational control of a group headquarters (HQ). For example, the Group headquarters at Messina, is called the Soutpansberg Military Area. The other areas are the following;

- Group 33, Nelspruit
- Group 12, Ermelo
- Group 14, Pietersburg

The RJTFN HQ is responsible for the operational deployment of the Group headquarters or tactical headquarters under its command. However, the RJTFN receives its operational instructions from Pretoria, where the Chief of Joint Operations (CJOPS) is located, which controls the operational deployment of the SANDF. The Group headquarters also receives some additional instructions from Defence Intelligence and the Army in terms of preparing forces for deployment.

Currently, there is one company deployed in each of these groups or military areas under the command of the RJTFN. A full-strength company consists of approximately 140 personnel, including support personnel like mechanics and medical staff. A company is divided into three platoons. Each platoon comprises some 36 soldiers and is divided into three sections. A section is made up of a rifle group and a light machine gun (LMG) group, called a detachment.

Relationship between the RJTFN and the SAPS

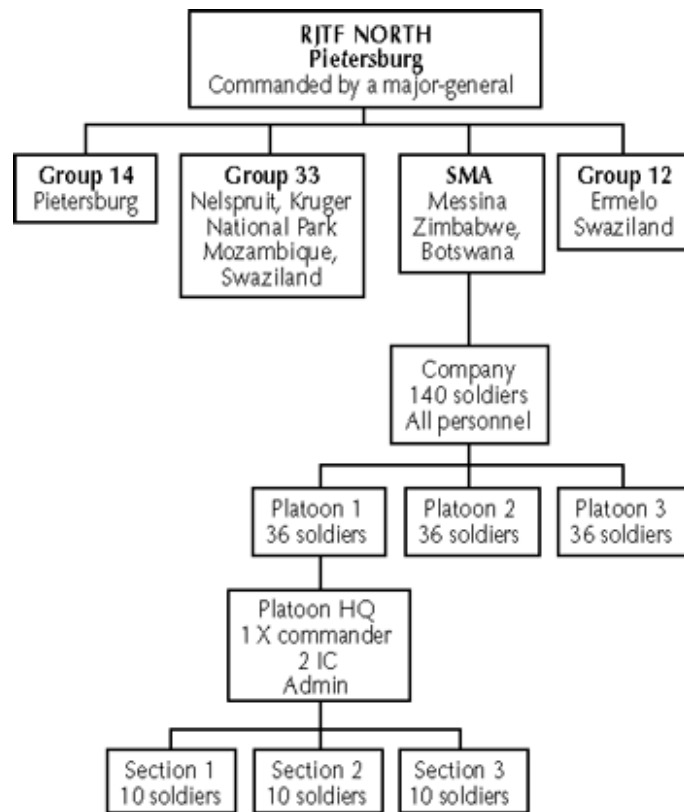
Duplication with regard to figures for firearm seizures occurs from time to time between the RJTFN and the SAPS when both parties claim the same success as their own. However, this is not a major problem and will not distort any statistics negatively. These duplications mainly occur when both the SAPS and SANDF are jointly involved in an operation.

When firearms are seized by the SANDF, these together with any suspects must be handed over to the SAPS as soon as possible for further investigations and placement before a court of law.

Joint operations between the SAPS and SANDF take place on a regular basis and are important for establishing sound working relationships.

The working relationship between the SAPS and the RJTFN is generally sound, but distrust and friction are present in some areas between the SAPS and SANDF. This is only the viewpoint of the military as no interviews were conducted with border police officers or any other police agencies in the areas during the course of the research. If distrust and accusations of corruption can be addressed in a positive manner, information-sharing will undoubtedly improve which will result in a higher level of seizures of illegal goods and firearms. Distrust and an attitude of not working with the police if soldiers do not have to, seem to be a problem only at middle and lower management levels. On higher levels of the chain of command, distrust and accusations are notably less, and a high level of co-operation exists.

Figure 1: Structure of the Regional Joint Task Force North



Operational aspects of border control

A 'filter system' is used by the military to provide area security. The 'filter system' is a concept used by military groups to 'enforce their control' over an area by means of dividing the area into filters or sections. In the borderline control concept, the filter system functions as follows:

- *Filter one*: the actual borderline;
- *Filter two*: the first 10 kilometres from the borderline; and
- *Filter three*: the rest of the military area in the group's area of responsibility.

In practical terms, this implies the following:

- *Filter one*: The actual borderline consists of, for example, the Limpopo River on the northern-most international border of South Africa and is the first filter. Here, border protection is achieved by making use of the alarm system contained in the Norex electrical fence, which extends for the length of the border. Soldiers are deployed at substations every ten kilometres along the fence to monitor the fence alarm. Foot and vehicle patrols are undertaken as part of this filter along the fence and in reaction to alarms.
- *Filter two*: This filter consists of the first 10 kilometres from the first filter (the actual borderline) and includes all dirt roads, roads, towns and bus stops in the area.
- *Filter three*: Filter three usually consists of the first 30 kilometres following the ten-kilometre filter two area. It also includes the rest of the military area of which the area protection is the responsibility of particular headquarters.

The military concentrates more on filter two and three when searching for illegal immigrants or attempting to detect any crossborder criminal activities. It is mainly in these two filter areas where illegal immigrants would be found moving towards national roads, gathering at taxi ranks or bus stops, or waiting at prearranged points to offload or pick up illegal goods. This is supported by the fact that more arrests are made in the filter two and three areas than in filter one. The filter system is used with success by the military in all the areas visited. It must be noted that, for filter one to be more effective, more reaction forces must be deployed than is currently the case. Unfortunately, operational requirements further inland mitigate against the increased force deployment along the border fence.

SOUTPANSBERG MILITARY AREA

The Soutpansberg Military Area (SMA) Headquarters is situated in Messina in the Northern Province.

Area of responsibility

The size of the area for which the SMA is responsible is approximately 4 040 square kilometres. The group's area of responsibility borders on two international borders, those of Botswana and Zimbabwe. The length of borderline for which the group is responsible is approximately 74 kilometres shared with Botswana and approximately 225 kilometres shared with Zimbabwe.

Along the borderline with Zimbabwe, starting at the Sand River just east of Messina up to the Alldays area, the Norex electrical fence marks the borderline. There is a gap of approximately 32 kilometres in the Norex fence at the Vhembe area. The Norex fence is manned by military personnel from the SMA who are stationed at substations every ten kilometres along the border. One to two soldiers are deployed at each substation. When interference occurs on the fence, which is set on alarm mode, it will register at the substation closest to the interference, at the SMA headquarters, as well as at the offices of the contractor responsible for the maintenance of the electrical fence. The electrical fence was severely damaged during the 2000 floods and is under repair, placing an extra burden on funds and personnel to maintain the same level of readiness.

The rest of the borderline east of the Sand River follows the Limpopo River, and consists mainly of farming lands. In this area, sisal plants formed a barrier in the past, but these were cleared to make way for an extension of the Norex electrical fence. However, it was never erected because no funds were available to do so. The sisal barrier was also very badly damaged by elephants and monkeys eating the plants. It is debatable whether the sisal 'fence' was ever really effective.

Farmers along this stretch of the border assist the military and the police in reporting suspected crossings and illegal immigrants in their areas.

Resources available

The total border area of approximately 300 kilometres is patrolled and staffed by five platoons. Their main responsibility is borderline control within the ten-kilometre stretch from the international border. The SANDF also makes use of the commando system in this area.

Traditionally, there were two types of vehicles available for the various sections, Samil troop carriers and motorcycles. For every section, there is currently one Samil 20 troop carrier available. However, all motorcycles were withdrawn from this area in November 2000 due to financial shortages. As a result, less motorcycles are available because of the high maintenance costs compared to an infantry foot company. It is worth noting that motorcycles were used to patrol the borderline and were seen as an effective force multiplier.

Illegal crossing points

The following places have been identified as the main illegal crossing points:

- *Vhembe*: This is a 32 kilometre long traditional crossing point between Zimbabwe and South Africa. This is also the area where the Norex electrical fence was not erected, as it would have infringed on a migration route of elephants in the area.
- *Weipe*: This area has some of the biggest cotton and vegetable farms in the province, both very labour intensive enterprises. Approximately 3 100 Zimbabwean citizens are working on these farms. Many of these Zimbabwean workers are illegal immigrants, but are employed on these farms, as they are cheaper than local labour.
- *Maroi*: This area is mainly involved in vegetable production, another labour intensive enterprise.
- *Beit Bridge*: This area is where the biggest concentration of illegal immigrants enter South Africa through the Northern Province. Transport from here to the rest of South Africa is easy to find in the form of taxis, transport trucks and other informal modes of

transport. From here, illegal immigrants are transported to Louis Trichardt and then on to Gauteng.

- *Sand River*: The Norex electrical fence stops at the Sand River, which is east of Beit Bridge. This is also the shortest distance from Beit Bridge to Messina and is often used by illegal immigrants who prefer not to cross the Norex electrical fence.
- *Leeudraai*: This area is identified as a common smuggling route from Zimbabwe into South Africa, and vice versa. Illegal immigrants are gathered at the town of Diti?? in Zimbabwe and are then moved from there to this area to cross illegally into South Africa. Operators who are familiar with the route escort illegal immigrants and/or illegal goods to the South African border on the Zimbabwean side. Once on the South African side, there are three routes taken into South Africa by these operators.

All the labour intensive areas where cotton or vegetables are grown, are areas where farmers are making use of both legal and illegal labour from Zimbabwe and South Africa. A very small proportion of the farmers also make use of illegal immigrants, as they are much cheaper than South African labourers and pose far less problems in terms of labour disputes, wage demands and unrest as a result of their fear of being detected in the country and being repatriated. Some farmers and nature reserve areas make use of illegal immigrants and when the SANDF and SAPS enter these areas or farms, they normally encounter strong resistance and a lack of co-operation from owners in identifying illegal immigrants on their properties.

Firearm seizures

From August 1999 to October 2000, the SMA was responsible for the seizure of 24 firearms.

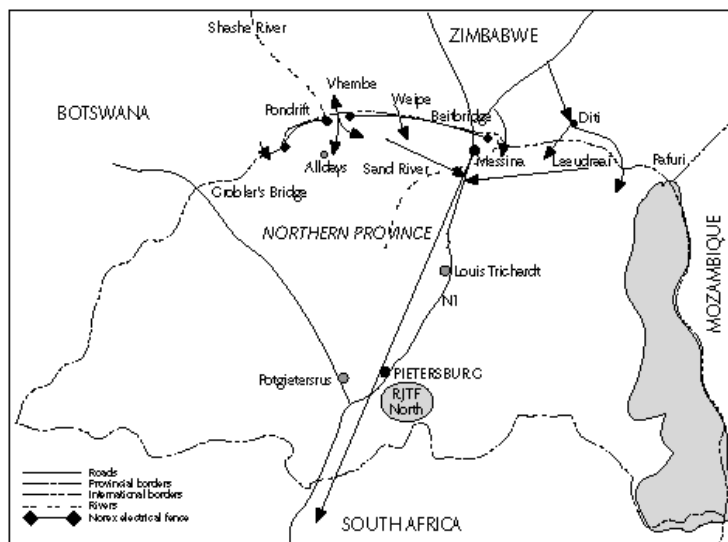
GROUP 33 HEADQUARTERS, NELSPRUIT

Group 33 Headquarters is situated in Nelspruit, Mpumalanga.

Area of responsibility

The Group 33 area of responsibility starts at the northern fence of the Kruger National Park at Pafuri along the South African/Mozambican border up to the Swaziland/South African border near Jeppes' Reef. The group patrols a stretch of 62 kilometres along the Mozambican border, including the 62 kilometres of Norex electrical fence, and 120 kilometres along the Swaziland border up to the Josefsdal border post with one company, while there is one company responsible for patrolling the Kruger Park and the border fence with Mozambique.

MAP 1: Northern borders of South Africa with Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique



Illegal crossing points

The following illegal crossing points were identified outside the Kruger National Park:

- Masakosapan area

- Makhadzi area
- Shishangani area
- Nkongoma area
- Substation 1 on the electrical fence
- Substation 2 on the electrical fence
- Substation 5 on the electrical fence
- Mbuzini
- Zulu Crossing
- Mgobode
- Magudu
- Jeppes Reef

Firearm seizures

From August 1999 to October 2000, Group 33 was responsible for the seizure of 92 firearms. This is a substantial number of firearms. The military was also concerned about the uncontrolled air space and the use of small airfields by smugglers to bring in and take out illegal goods. A similar viewpoint to that of other areas was expressed that the smuggling of firearms has declined in the last few years and that the method of smuggling has changed from operations undertaken by individuals to sophisticated operations by organised groups or syndicates moving their illegal goods through the actual border post. They also believe that corruption plays a major role at border posts. This was recently confirmed by the arrest of at least nine police officers working at in Komatipoort for corruption involving motor vehicles.

KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

Area of responsibility

The company based in the Kruger National Park falls under the command of Group 33 in Nelspruit and is responsible for the whole Kruger National Park and sections outside the National Park. This constitutes part of the border area with Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

Resources available

This company consists of one company for the entire park. This includes administrative personnel, personnel responsible for servicing vehicles and for the day-to-day tasks on the base itself. Members of the military in the park make use of the positioning of observation posts on the most well-known routes of illegal entry into South Africa. They also make use of the filter system, where the second filter would be the ten-kilometre area from the borderline, as well as the western boundary of the park.

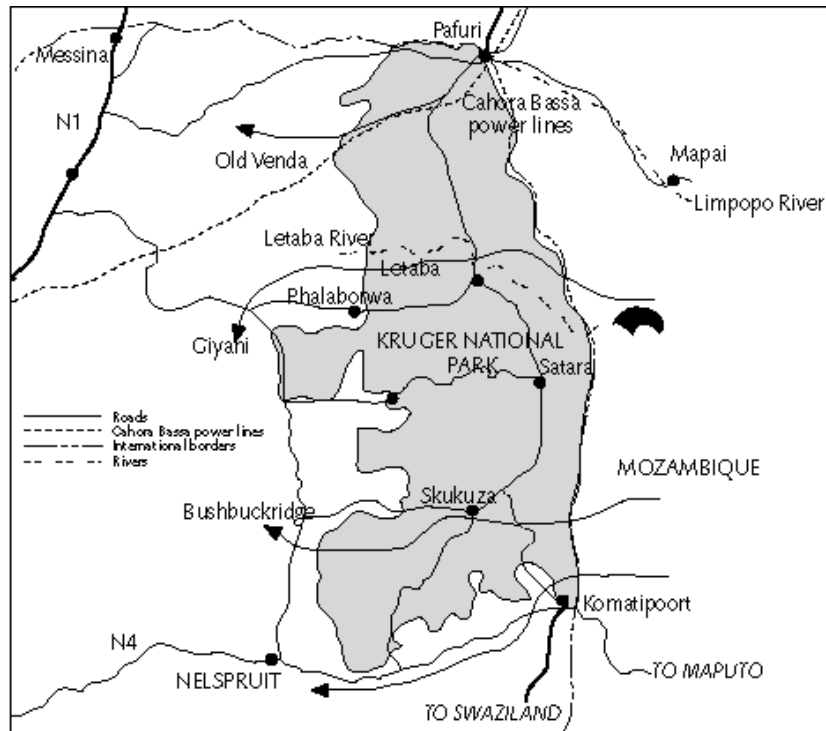
Illegal crossing points

There are four main smuggling routes used through the Kruger National Park. These are not only used for firearm-smuggling, but are also used by illegal immigrants to enter South Africa.

- *Cahora Bassa power lines/Pafuri area*: This route is used because it is clear and presents an identifiable structure with which smugglers and illegal immigrants can navigate themselves through the park. The main destination for users of this route is the former Venda area.
- *Shingwedzi River area*: People mainly from the Mapai area in Mozambique use this route to enter South Africa and their main destinations are the former Venda and Giyani areas in the Northern Province. In the early 1990s, the Mapai area was known as an area where large quantities of arms were cached or stashed with few if any security measures in place. Operations Rachel have destroyed most of these arms caches, but information available to the military indicates that there are still arms caches hidden away in the Mapai area. However, some of these arms caches may have been destroyed or moved by the floods in the area during 2000 and 2001.
- *Olifants River area*: This area is mainly used for entry into South Africa from the Massingir area in Mozambique. The end destination is usually the Bushbuckridge area in Mpumalanga.
- *Southern area of the Kruger National Park*: It is easier to move through this area as there is a less risk of coming in contact with wild animals. The main destination from

here is Nelspruit and then on to Gauteng. This area is also well-known for firearm and vehicle-smuggling.

Map 2: The location of the Kruger National Park with respect to South Africa's northern borders



Firearm seizures

From August 1999 to October 2000, the Kruger Park company seized no firearms whatsoever. This is alarming as this represents the biggest land border area with Mozambique, a country where there are still arms caches available that could be used as sources for arms to be smuggled into South Africa. The SANDF indicated that they are aware of arms caches in Mozambique close to the Pafuri and Mapai area. The easy availability of assault rifles in Mozambique aids poaching in the Kruger National Park and poachers often use AK-47s for this purpose.

It is also maintained that firearm-smuggling has declined dramatically over the last years and that, if smuggling is still taking place, it occurs on a very small scale. The military in the Kruger Park share the view that smuggling through the border posts has become much easier than before and that smugglers would rather use this method than having to navigate through the park with the added danger of encountering lions and other dangerous animals. The border post allows for a larger quantity of firearms to be transported far easier than porters could do or the odd 4x4 vehicle via the Kruger National Park. It must also be recognised that fewer soldiers are deployed in the Kruger Park, which will result in fewer seizures.

GROUP 12 HEADQUARTERS, ERMELO

Group 12 is situated just outside Ermelo in Mpumalanga.

Area of responsibility

Group 12 is responsible for the border area with Swaziland from Josefsdal to the northern KwaZulu-Natal provincial border with Mpumalanga, a total of 158 kilometres.

Resources available

Group 12 has only one company deployed at any given time to patrol and manage the borderline area. Group 12 also makes use of the commando system, but only utilises the

commandos at Carolina, Ermelo and Piet Retief for some borderline functions. The functions of the commandos are more focused on area protection than on borderline control.

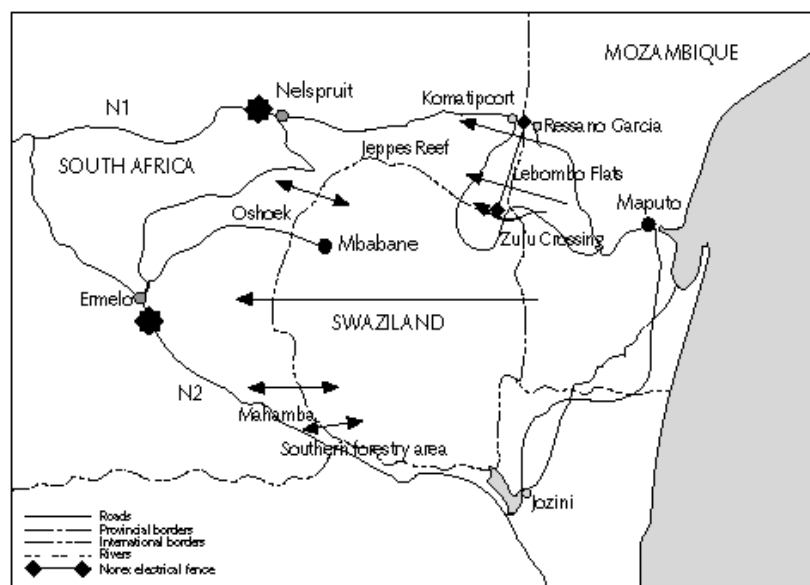
Like the Soutpansberg Military Area, Group 12 also had its motorcycles withdrawn from the border area in 2000 for the same reasons.

Illegal crossing points

Problem or illegal crossing areas are not as easy to determine here as in other areas. At some places, the international borderline is indicated only by painted stones, and in other areas, the forest is very dense and forestry companies have forests that straddle both sides of the international border. Areas identified as problematic are the following:

- Oshoek area
- Mahamba area
- Northern Lebombo mountain area
- Southern forestry area

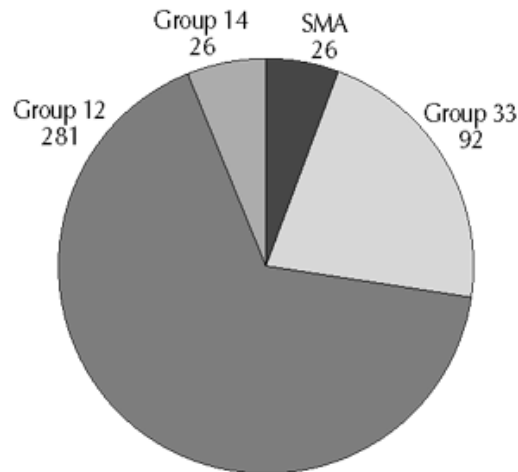
Map 3: Group 12 area of responsibility



Firearm seizures

From August 1999 to October 2000, Group 12 was responsible for the seizure of 281 firearms. This is the greatest number of firearm seizures by any of the areas responsible for borderline control on South Africa's eastern and northern international borders. This may be an indication that more firearms are moving across the international border to and from Swaziland than from any other neighbouring states. During interviews, it was mentioned that firearms were leaving South Africa to enter Swaziland illegally, rather than firearms entering South Africa from there.

Figure 2: Firearm seizures by the RJTF North, by group, August 1999 - October 2000



The group indicated that the main criminal activities prevalent in its area of responsibility are stock theft, stolen vehicles leaving South Africa and illegal immigrants entering South Africa.

FIREARM-SMUGGLING IN THE NORTHERN PROVINCE AND MPUMALANGA

According to the RJTFN, firearm-smuggling into South Africa across the country's land border is most definitely declining, but there is an increase in the internal smuggling of firearms in South Africa. It is believed that the demand for AK-47s in the country has declined dramatically, with the non-availability of ammunition for these weapons cited as a major cause.

It is also much easier for criminals to obtain firearms inside South Africa rather than to go through the trouble and risk the possibility of being caught while moving firearms illegally across the country's international borders. This does not mean that the RJTFN believes that AK-47s will suddenly disappear from criminal activities such as taxi wars, cash heists and hijackings, but rather that those already in the hands of criminals will continue to be used by them.

Zimbabwe is not viewed as a source of firearms to South Africa, but is rather seen as a transit country of firearms to South Africa. If illegal firearms were moving across the border with Zimbabwe, these would rather be firearms that have been re-routed via Zimbabwe from Mozambique to South Africa.

The RJTFN has not picked up any indicators related to firearm-smuggling for the last two years in the area under its command. It believes that the method of firearm-smuggling has changed in that organised crime syndicates are now bringing in firearms together with other cargo through the actual border post. It is no longer the individual walking across the border with one or two firearms who is the main perpetrator of this crime. To demonstrate this, the RJTFN has arrested nearly 34 000 illegal immigrants in the last year with little indication from arrests or interceptions that these immigrants were bringing firearms into South Africa. Estimates indicated that a very small percentage of all cargo moving through the Beit Bridge and Lebombo border posts are searched, making the smuggling of goods, including firearms, much easier through the border post.

The RJTFN does not consider the smuggling of firearms into its area of responsibility as a problem, but rather sees the organised smuggling of illegal immigrants as a major issue. At least three-quarters of all firearm seizures by the different groups under the command of the RJTFN are 9mm pistols and are inexpensive brands. These firearms are mainly seized in areas away from the actual international border.

In all the interviews conducted with military personnel, views were shared on how the

smuggling of firearms takes place in their respective areas of responsibility. All the respondents were convinced that the methods, routes and pipelines used in the past have changed. In the past, small groups or individuals carried firearms across the borderline and sold or hid them in safe places in South Africa, either for political or criminal use in the country. Today, the smuggling of illegal goods, including firearms, has changed with organised crime syndicates becoming more involved in controlling smuggling networks through which goods, including firearms, are moved into South Africa either in trucks, cars or by plane. They believe that the large volumes of traffic moving through the country's border posts make it difficult to search all cargo and easy for criminals to move illegal goods into the country without being detected.

Another shared viewpoint is that the rate of firearm-smuggling into South Africa has declined dramatically. This has not been the result of better or stricter border control methods, but because firearms are available in greater numbers and can be obtained much easier inside South Africa. It is easier for criminals to steal firearms from the civilian population or from military and police armouries than running the risk of being arrested on the border in possession of illegal firearms, or transporting firearms safely over long distances which can be far too time-consuming.

Also, ammunition for some of the firearms commonly smuggled into South Africa such as the AK-47, is not as available as before.

Another view commonly shared between the military personnel and groups interviewed, is that their main priority is not the recovery and seizure of firearms. Their efforts and resources are more concentrated on arresting illegal immigrants entering South Africa and supporting the SAPS in crime prevention operations in these border areas.

The priorities encountered in the different military areas are as follows:

- In the Messina area, the priorities are mainly illegal immigrants entering South Africa and the smuggling of household goods from South Africa into Zimbabwe.
- On the South African/Botswana border, the main illegal commodity that is smuggled is endangered species products.
- In the Kruger National Park, illegal immigrants also take up a large portion of the time of the unit, but poaching and stolen vehicles are also criminal activities, which they have to deal with.
- In the Group 33 and Group 12 areas, illegal immigrants, stolen vehicles and stock theft take up much of the personnel's time.

CONCLUSION

The research, conducted by means of interviews with the military, indicated that there are new trends emerging in the movement of firearms across South Africa's international borders. Firearms and other illegal goods appear to be moved by organised crime syndicates under cover of the large volumes of traffic at border posts where it is clear that inadequate search methods and facilities are only able to deal with a very small percentage of all cargo moving through. The smuggler who used to carry firearms on foot across the border presently employs the general chaos at border posts to conceal illegal goods and bring them into the country by truck or car.

Currently, the bulk of the sources of illegal firearms for the South African market are in South Africa itself, originating mainly from civilian possession, and police and military arsenals. The military in this area believe that the smuggling of illegal firearms across their border area has declined dramatically compared to a few years ago. But they believe this decline in firearm-smuggling is not due to improved border controls, but because it is much easier to obtain firearms from local sources rather than taking the trouble of smuggling them across the border.

If the government is indeed serious about borderline control and the crossborder crimes associated with it, the lack of personnel and resources deployed to handle these issues should be seriously considered. It seems that South Africa's international land borderlines are

open to whomever wants to enter or leave with illegal goods, including firearms, without being detected or brought to book for these illegal actions.

NOTES

1. Briefing by Major-General J Lusse, Deputy Chief of Joint Operations, SANDF, University of Pretoria, 6 February 2001.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

ABOUT THIS PAPER

Borderline control and security were the responsibility of the South African Police (SAP) until the end of 1990, with the Army maintaining a presence on the borders since the 1970s. In the Interim Constitution of 1993, borderline functions were again allocated to the South African Police Service (SAPS). However, with the sharp rise in crime in the country, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) was placed in service to assist the SAPS with borderline security, among others. This paper examines the areas of responsibility of different SANDF groups, the available resources, illegal crossing points and the recorded seizures of firearms. Some remarks by the SANDF are offered on the smuggling of arms in the Northern Province and Mpumalanga.

FUNDER

European Union