

Robberies Involving Security Forces Sends Shock Waves in Zimbabwe

Dr SP Makombe

Zimbabwe Open University

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ABSTRACT

The security forces in Zimbabwe often use the threat of crime to draw the attention of politicians. It has been noted that majority of the security forces know nothing except military skills, therefore it is difficult to get employment. The specials pension they were entitled to is supposed to help them survive before they end up being engaged in criminal activities. It is worth noting that politicians have uncritically adopted the approach of linking security forces' involvement in criminal activities to the lack of economic opportunities. The lack of economic opportunities seems a plausible reason to explain the involvement of security forces in crime when one considers the unemployment rate and the deep economic inequalities in Zimbabwe. Criminal activities such as robberies, land barons, drug trafficking, car hijackings, muggings and house breaking has been a concern in Zimbabwean community. This is used a form of revenge against the government which had failed to give them adequate or no pensions. The findings concludes that some firearms were looted by soldiers after the removal of Robert Mugabe from office in November 2017 after the removal of Robert Mugabe from office since there was no proper handover-takeover done. It is recommended that the security forces need special pension irrespective of our age so that we don't think of crime or shoplifting.

Key words: Security forces, pensions, Crime, Reintegration, Economy

INTRODUCTION

The Zimbabwean government has remained highly intolerant of dissenting voices and has further restricted the space for human rights defenders, who have increasingly been subject to harassment and human rights violations with the security force. In its 2021 State of Human Rights report, the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum noted that civic space was continuing to shrink at an alarming rate. This sentiment was echoed by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and various U.N. special rapporteurs. The criminal justice system and judicial processes have been used to restrict fundamental civil rights. The Private Voluntary Organizations (PVO) Act (2022), the proposed amendments to the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, and the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021) have seriously undermined the work of human rights defenders and NGOs, especially those working on governance issues. Particularly in 2021, the government weaponized the COVID-19 crisis to launch fresh attacks on human rights. Although President Emmerson Mnangagwa has warned security personnel for taking part in criminal activities and vowed to use ruthless means to deal with them, civilians in Zimbabwe are living in fear. A recent spate of armed robberies involving soldiers and policemen has sent shockwaves across the landlocked Southern African country of Zimbabwe.

BACKGROUND

The involvement of soldiers and policemen security forces members in crime is a complex issue with various factors contributing to it. In Zimbabwe factors contributing to involvement of security forces to crime involve lack of economic opportunities. Security personnel may struggle to find employment or reintegrate into civilian life, leading them to engage in criminal activities. Security forces receive training in tactics, surveillance, and security force, which can be misused for criminal purposes. In Zimbabwe, security personnel may have access to firearms, equipment, or networks that can facilitate criminal activities and exposure to traumatic events during their service can lead to mental health issues, substance abuse, or aggressive behavior. The possibilities are that

crimes involvement of security personnel members may join or form organized crime groups, leveraging their skills and networks. Their training and access to firearms can increase the risk of violent crimes, such as armed robbery or assault and security personnel may use their connections or knowledge to engage in corrupt activities, such as bribery or extortion.

According to ZRP (2024) report, more than \$5 million were robbed last year from January to October. “We are living in fear, what we are hearing in the news daily is shocking and to make it worse the robberies are involving soldiers and members of the police,” said Innocent Guyo, a jewelry trader. Brig. Gen. Augustine Chipwere, the army spokesman, regretted the involvement of soldiers in armed robberies and shootings during public brawls. The Zimbabwe Defense Forces (ZDF) acknowledges and regrets the loss of innocent lives and deeply commiserates with the bereaved families and communities. According to local media outlets, two soldiers shot dead a man in a \$40, 000 robbery heist in Hatfield, Harare, last year on Dec. 24 2025. Earlier, an on-duty soldier from the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA)'s elite commando regiment was identified as one of the alleged armed robbers involved in the fatal shootout at top police detective Joseph Nemaisha's Chadcombe house on Dec. 6. 2025. He was shot dead on the scene by the detective, together with his two accomplices. A year ago, two other soldiers had allegedly connived with security guards of a bank and stole \$2.7 million. There are several theories making rounds to explain the involvement of soldiers in the act of robberies.

A former army officer on the condition of anonymity said these robberies were linked to the economic collapse and financial desperation that everyone is facing in the country. People are exploring opportunities available to them to make a living. Politicians are looting national resources; civil servants are taking bribes. The soldiers and police are also using powers at their disposal to make money,” he said. “Unlike many countries in the region, Zimbabweans don’t trust their banking system owing to losses incurred from 2007 to 2009, hyperinflation era. Therefore, everyone keeps money at home in the form of US currency and that is attracting criminals,” he added. Police spokesperson Paul Nyathi said they have arrested 849 alleged robbers in 2021. He said in some of the robberies after investigations employees from the companies were found involved and passing information of movement of cash. Police spokesperson urge businesses to step up security during cash in transit and individuals to avoid moving with large sums of cash or storing cash at home,” he said. Former minister Godfrey Gandawa said the robbers were using guns stolen from the state armory back in the 2017 coup.

The seemingly sudden wave of armed robberies involving members of the Zimbabwe defense forces is linked to the chaotic, unlawful, and dangerous takeover of armories during the 2017 coup, where the police and intelligence services were disarmed without a formal handover-takeover process. Soldiers hostile to coup leaders were disarmed without any documentation process. Gandawa, who is in self-exile in South Africa, said the Zimbabwean government is unable to account for state armory. He said some of the firearms were looted by soldiers since there was no proper handover-takeover after the removal of Robert Mugabe from office. It is unclear whether these weapons were returned to state custody. These weapons add a new dimension to Zimbabwe’s security situation,” Gandawa added. However, even when war veterans are not directly involved in gangs they might service the gangs by supplying or renting weapons, servicing the weapons, etc. Thus, war veterans, whether as members of criminal gangs, or as ‘service providers’ to gangs, are part of a sophisticated social network.

Means for Criminality among Security Forces

In the security forces however, motivations alone cannot explain why security forces turn to crime. It is also important to focus on the means for criminality amongst security force. Security forces who commit crime operate within a conducive environment in the form of a culture of criminality. This refers to the extent to which crime has infiltrated different sectors of the Zimbabwean society. This is evident in the involvement of members of parliament in the travel voucher fraud, the involvement of politicians in irregular tender procedures, the acceptance of a bribe by a traffic police officer who should be issuing a traffic fine, the high levels of corruption at the Department of Home Affairs offices and the country’s ports of entry, the involvement of civil servants in social grants fraud and many other illegal financial transactions. Crime seems to be a way of life and security forces are only a sub-set of a larger group of people involved in criminal activities. Thus, in some cases, security forces become involved in crime such as armed robbery after being recruited into existing criminal gangs because of their military skills.

There are some instances where security force members recruit people without military skills whom they train in the use of various weapons. This is because some security force members were in the high command of their various armed forces including intelligence divisions. Their skills in gathering information, planning and execution of offensive operations come in handy. Those who were involved in the political education departments are said to have an added advantage because they can persuade and mobilise ordinary people who are struggling to make ends meet in a poverty-stricken contemporary Zimbabwe. In other instances, some security forces belong to gangs formed, and consisting exclusively of war veterans. For example, Joseph Chinotimba, a war veteran who has been involved in various incidents of violence and intimidation, including during elections. The involvement of security force members in crime is a multifaceted issue requiring a comprehensive approach to address its root causes and mitigate its consequences.

Conceptual Framework

The involvement of security force members in crime is analysed within the context of South Africa's failure to successfully reintegrate security forces into civilian society. Reintegration refers to the process of facilitating the transition of security force members to civilian life, which allows them to adapt economically and socially to productive civilian life. Reintegration is meant to provide an enabling environment for transition to civilian life. Demobilized security forces are responsible for making choices and determining their destiny within an enabling environment. The reintegration of war veterans into civilian society consists of three dimensions: social, political and economic. Social reintegration refers to the process through which war veterans are made to feel part of and accepted by the community. This involves a psychological adjustment in which security force members stop seeing themselves as a social group associated with weapons and the skills of war. An indicator of the successful social reintegration of war veterans into civilian society is when they stop seeing themselves as a distinct social group that is entitled to special benefit.

Political reintegration refers to a process through which ex- security forces learn to participate fully in the political life of their communities. Political reintegration includes participation in structures such as local government councils, school governing bodies, and local security committees. The last form of reintegration, economic reintegration, refers to a process through which security force members build their livelihoods through production, service provision and/or other forms of gainful employment. It is generally agreed that security forces members who have no other means of earning a living have the potential to destabilise post-conflict societies especially through armed criminality. Despite this danger, the reintegration of war veterans in Zimbabwe was not properly planned and failed to assist most war veterans in their transition to civilian society. This paper uses the concept 'security forces' as opposed to 'soldiers and police'. It is common to refer to members of a statutory force as soldiers and those of police as security forces.

The case of South Africa

Due to the proliferation of small arms, South Africa remains a heavily armed society.⁷³ South African civilians own 3.7-million firearms, while the police and the army have 567 000 guns between them. South African civilians thus have more than six times as many firearms as those held by the state security forces. While not the cause, the availability of small arms increases the potential for violent crime not only by security force members but by other members of society as well. As stated above, violent crime is not the exclusive terrain of security forces and it is not the only type of crime they are drawn into. Violent crime is used to illustrate the culture of criminality and not to imply that it is the only crime that attracts security forces members. A culture of criminality and the involvement of security forces in crime have implications for the social integration of security force members into civilian society.

In 2006, media reports revealed that Azanian People's Liberation Army APLA and Umkhonto we Sizwe MK cadres were involved in gun-running. According to a report in the Mail and Guardian, gun dealers on the streets of Sharpeville in the Vaal Triangle agreed to lease a journalist an AK-47 for a day for R2 000.⁷⁰ Corrupt soldiers and police officers are also part of the multi-billion rand criminal economy. For example, in November 2006 a press report revealed that bullet-proof jackets from a military supply store sold for R500 each to use in cash-in-transit heists. On 10 September 2007 Constable Richard Msibi of the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Police Department EMPD, who is in his 50s, was allegedly caught red-handed selling ammunition at the

Wattville/Actonville hostel. He was in full Metro Police uniform at the time and was travelling in his own car. He was allegedly found with 103 9mm rounds and 122 AK-47 rounds, an AK-47 magazine as well as counterfeit R50 notes hidden in the back of his bakkie.

The Case of Zimbabwe

War veterans in Zimbabwe have been involved in various activities that have sparked controversy and concern. Some of these activities include violent land seizures. War veterans, led by figures like Chenjerai "Hitler" Hunzvi, were instrumental in the violent land seizures that began in 2000, which led to the displacement of many white commercial farmers and disruptions to the country's agricultural sector. War veterans have been accused of perpetrating violence and intimidation against opposition supporters, particularly during elections. They have been linked to various incidents of violence, including beatings, torture, and even killings. Some war veterans have been accused of corruption and embezzlement, including the misappropriation of funds meant for veterans' welfare. Chenjerai Hunzvi's leadership of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association was marked by allegations of corruption and authoritarianism. War veterans have been accused of being partisan and supporting the ruling ZANU-PF party. They have been involved in suppressing opposition movements and have been linked to various incidents of violence and intimidation against opposition supporters.

In Zimbabwe, some notable war veterans involved in these activities include Blessed Geza, a prominent war veteran and politician who has been involved in various controversies, including criticizing President Emmerson Mnangagwa and facing legal charges for incitement to public violence. Chenjerai "Hitler" Hunzvi, a former leader of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association who was instrumental in the land seizures and was accused of corruption and authoritarianism. The involvement of war veterans in these activities has had significant consequences for Zimbabwe, including economic instability. The violent land seizures and economic mismanagement have contributed to Zimbabwe's economic instability and decline. The violence and intimidation perpetrated by war veterans have resulted in significant human rights abuses, including torture, beatings, and killings. The partisan activities of war veterans have contributed to the polarization of politics in Zimbabwe, making it challenging to achieve national reconciliation and stability.

In another case land barons in Zimbabwe under ZANU PF allegedly target Rhodes Family Estate in April 2025. The suspected land barons are reportedly attempting to seize properties belonging to the estate of Brian James Rhodes grandson of colonial figure Cecil John Rhodes by falsely posing as Zanu PF officials. The Rhodes family has since made an emotional plea to President Emmerson Mnangagwa, urging his intervention to halt the alleged fraudulent land grabs. Elizabeth Anne Rhodes, widow of the late Brian James Rhodes, claims she was forcibly evicted from one of the family's properties under the pretext that her husband had resigned from managing the estate in 2012 six years after his documented death in 2006. According to court papers, Elizabeth appointed Elizabeth Parirenyatwa as the executor of her late husband's estate in 2002. The move was intended to ensure that the family could begin healing and uphold the provisions of Brian Rhodes' last will and testament. The appointment was meant to prevent any illegal sales of land, and to ensure that all matters were reported to the responsible authorities swiftly. It aimed to restore order, remove illegal occupants, and secure the rightful inheritance for the beneficiaries myself and our four children as stated in the will.

However, the estate's management has since become a point of contention. In a prior court hearing, an assistant from the Master of the High Court revealed that the office had received multiple complaints from Brian Rhodes' children regarding Parirenyatwa's role as executor. Under cross-examination, the assistant confirmed that the children were firmly opposed to her continued involvement. A defence lawyer went on to allege that Parirenyatwa was mentally unstable and had a criminal history, claims that reportedly underpinned the family's desire to have her removed. Despite the controversy, records show that Brian Rhodes passed away on July 29, 2006, and his estate was registered under DRI 426/1. Parirenyatwa was later appointed executor dative after being granted power of attorney by Elizabeth. Cecil John Rhodes, the family patriarch, was the founder of the British South Africa Company, which played a central role in the colonization of Zimbabwe in the late 19th century. He died in 1902 and was buried in what is now Matobo National Park. With the legacy of the Rhodes name still tied to significant land holdings, the family's plea underscores growing concerns over land baronism and the misuse of political affiliations to exploit property rights.

FINDINGS

Due to the absence of a clear policy and/or human resource conversion strategy, the participation of security force members is questionable. Former constables who reported that they served in ZRP argued that they would report criminals to the police irrespective of where the crime was committed. However, it emerged that some of the security force members do not want activities that would attract uninvited police officers to their communities. They argued that chances are that while looking for criminals, police officers might come across ‘innocent’ people smoking dagga, and thus arrest them. It is thus plausible to argue that the participation of some security forces is a strategy to monitor the movement of police officers. This seems to justify the concern of some community members about the involvement of some criminal elements in crime prevention initiatives such as community constables.

It is generally agreed that given the high rate of unemployment in Zimbabwe, security forces are likely to be attracted to crime prevention initiatives that bring them income. Some have joined the private security industry as owners of companies or security officers. However, the exact number of security forces who are not involved in the private security industry is unknown. Security forces members are not the cause of crime; however, they are vulnerable to being drawn in as role-players because of their skills, their social and economic exclusion and their political alienation. While this paper has pointed to the involvement of some security forces members in criminal activities, it is important to note that others have often taken initiatives to transform their lives and that of the communities in which they live. Some security forces members has been involved in, among other things, formal and informal efforts to protect communities against crime. It is worth nothing that while they may lack certain technical skills relevant to civilian life, many of the experiences of security force members can be converted for use in a civilian context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need to develop a comprehensive policy for the involvement of security forces members in crime prevention. Such a policy should take into consideration the socio-economic inequalities between different communities.

Governments and organizations can provide support, training, pensions and economic opportunities to help security personnel reintegrate into civilian life.

Providing access to mental health services can help address underlying issues that may contribute to criminal behavior.

Building trust between security personnel and their communities can help prevent criminal involvement.

Further Research

The causes of some security forces members to be engaged in crime will remain unknown, however it is important to engage and interview the members who has been involved in criminal activities and those in jail for their reintegration process.

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