Recent explosions in Tanzania and Mozambique underscore the impact of inadequate ammunition stockpile management

Lauren Tracey, Sarah Meek Fellow, Arms Management Programme, ISS

On 29 April 2009 there was a massive explosion at a government armoury on the outskirts of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The armoury, which is situated close to a military facility, and a mere 14 kilometres away from the city centre, was said to contain a significant amount of ordinance, including mines and artillery shells.

The explosion, which sent shockwaves throughout the city, resulted in the deaths of at least three people, and left scores more injured and homeless.

Less than a month later, on 27 May, there was a series of explosions at an arms and ammunition storage area in a remote part of Mozambique. It was reported that the explosions occurred on a base that was used by Renamo (the insurgent-group-turned-opposition-party) during the civil war in Mozambique. Allegedly, assault rifles, rockets and landmines were being stored in that area. While the cause of the
Recent explosions in Tanzania and Mozambique underscore the impact of inadequate ammunition stockpile management continued.

Explosions and their impact (casualties and injuries) has not yet been made known, it has been speculated that the explosion may have been brought about by inadequate storage processes and conditions. In March 2007, an explosion at a military ammunition storage facility in Malhuzine, which Mbangala, the Tanzanian military camp, which was next to the Dar es Salaam ammunition storage facility, was reportedly surrounded by civilian homes. At the time of the May 2009 Mozambique incident, ex-Renamo fighters were occupying the former base where the arms and ammunition were being stored. In the case of Malhuzine, a large civilian community had settled in close proximity to the ammunition storage area.

It is a well-established fact that ammunition storage facilities can be extremely hazardous and dangerous (see article by Ben Coetzee and Guy Lamb in this issue of Arms Control Africa). In all three instances, the ammunition explosions resulted in damage to property, injuries and loss of life. The toll could have been lessened had the necessary safety and effective management procedures been put in place. For example, in all three cases, the civilian population had not been prevented from settling in close proximity to the ammunition storage area.

The guidelines and best practice in question relate to:

- Location and construction of storage facilities
- Physical security measures, such as lock-and-key practice and access control
- The effective management of inventory, as well as accounting control procedures
- Protection measures in the event of an emergency situation
- Procedures aimed at maximising the security of arms and ammunition transport to and from the storage facilities
- Precautions and sanctions in the event of loss and theft of such arms and ammunition
- Security training, on stockpile management, location construction and security procedures, for personnel.