TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL
Defence & Security

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THE HUMAN TOLL OF CORRUPTION IN DEFENCE AND SECURITY

Stories of the impact of defence and security corruption on people's lives – and the urgent need for systemic change

Transparency International (TI) is the world's leading non-governmental anti-corruption organisation, addressing corruption and corruption risk in its many forms through a network of more than 100 national chapters worldwide.

Transparency International Defence & Security (TI-DS) works towards a world without corruption in defence and security.

Authors: Najla Dowson-Zeidan, Ara Marcen Naval, Josie Stewart, Barney Cullum, Ed Storey

Contributors: Michael Ofori-Mensah, Sabrina White, Denitsa Zhelyazkova, Shiromi Pinto (writingeditingwords.com), Colin Foo

With special thanks to, and solidarity with, all who shared their stories with us - in particular Mazin, Shoja, Peggy, Sandra and Grace.

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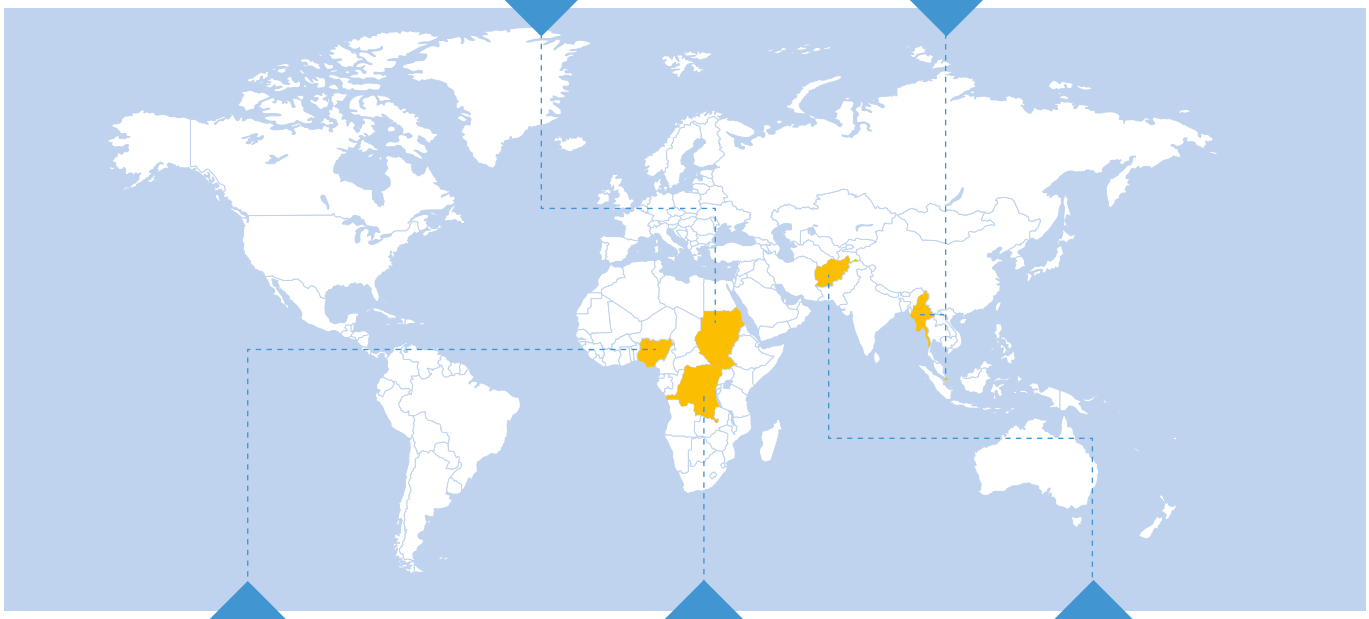

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CORRUPTION: NOT A VICTIMLESS CRIME

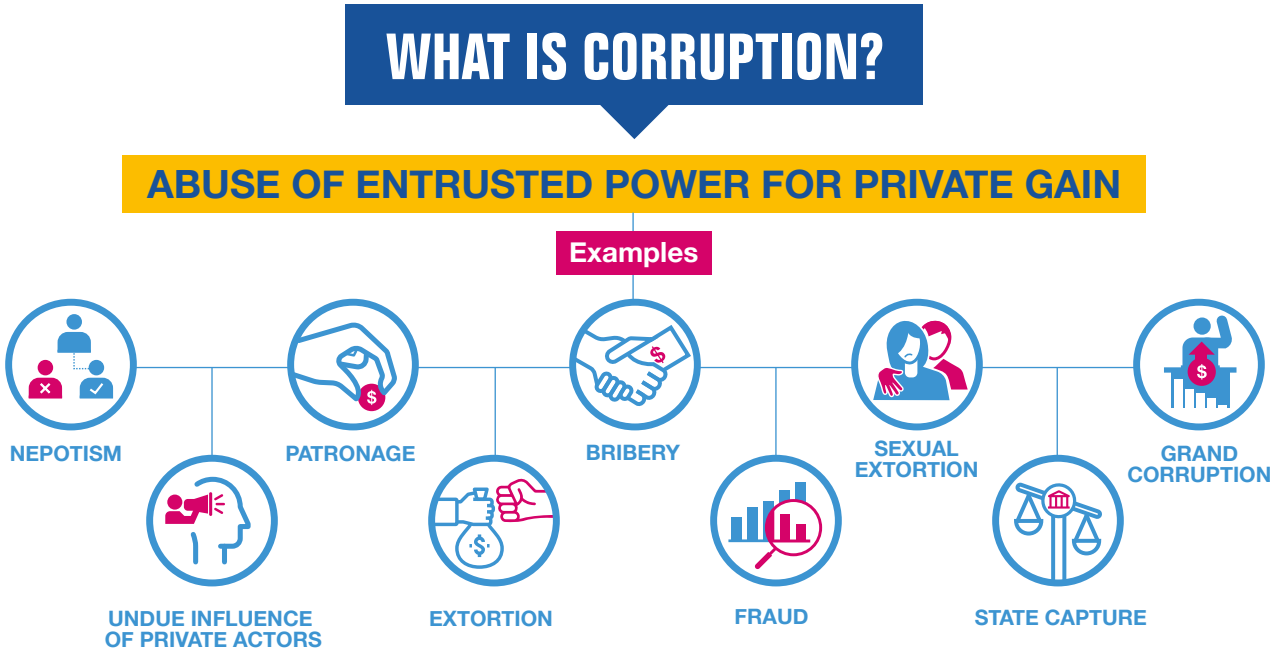
Too often corruption is seen as a bureaucratic crime. Focus tends to be on the culprits, the loopholes that allow them to get away with corruption, and the economic and political costs. The impact on people's lives is overlooked. In defence and security institutions – whose role it is to protect the population – the stakes are particularly high. Corruption is not just a crime: it is an equality issue, a development issue, and a human rights issue.

In this briefing, we showcase the experiences of people whose lives have been torn apart by corruption within the defence and security sector. Their stories are gathered from across the world, drawn from first-hand conversations with those willing to give testament, and from investigations conducted by media and international organisations.

From Mazin in Sudan, whose family's lives were turned upside down by conflict and destruction fuelled by corruption, to the villagers of Pazigyi in Myanmar, subjected to horrific crimes by military forces using weapons obtained through corruption, a common and disturbing thread is revealed. Far from being confined to shadowy business deals and officials skimming from government budgets, corruption in defence and security can – and does – have an immediate and horrific effect on people's lives. It allows malign forces to act with impunity in their own interests and at the expense of vulnerable people. It puts enrichment of powerful individuals and criminal networks ahead of ordinary people's access to essential services and basic protections. It allows abuse and human rights violations to take place, and undermines accountability, justice and opportunities for redress. It co-opts state institutions for the interests of the powerful few, with disastrous consequences for the security of the many. Ultimately, corruption costs livelihoods and lives.

These stories demonstrate how institutional weaknesses, gaps in oversight, systematic abuses of power, and lack of accountability within defence and security institutions have a disastrous impact on people's lives. We make the case for some of the key systemic steps needed to address the risk of corruption in these sectors. Where we should expect the highest standards and integrity, the defence and security sectors are characteristically opaque and closed off to the public. Defence secrecy on the grounds of national security often exempts these institutions from the levels of scrutiny and demands for good governance present in other sectors.

As these stories illustrate, governments and international organisations with a responsibility to protect the security and interests of ordinary citizens cannot afford to be complacent. They need to strengthen oversight and transparency in defence and security, build a culture of integrity, and close systemic weaknesses that can be exploited by corrupt individuals and networks. In this way, they can prevent harm to civilians, and safeguard human security and human rights.



10 WAYS CORRUPTION CAN HARM PEOPLE'S LIVES

1. **Corruption in defence drives conflict and undermines security.** It can lead to mass displacement, exile, community divisions, and more violence that can destroy lives and livelihoods.

2. **Corruption in defence can encourage and enable excessive use of military force by states.** It can empower corrupt regimes to repress minorities and dissenting voices, and contribute to states taking unnecessarily aggressive action with grave repercussions for human security and lives.

3. **Corruption in defence fuels armed violence.** It can lead to proliferation and diversion of weapons into the hands of armed groups, organised crime networks, and militias, leading to violence that often harms civilians.

4. **Corruption in defence erodes public trust in government institutions.** When people lose confidence in their defence institutions and their ability to provide protection and uphold the rule of law, it can result in unrest and rebellion, even playing into the hands of extremist groups.

5. **Corruption in defence can exacerbate poverty.** It can divert resources away from essential projects in other sectors, such as poverty reduction and clean energy initiatives, and public services such as healthcare and education which are crucial for improving living standards.

6. **Corruption in defence can deepen social inequalities.** Those who can afford to pay bribes or are part of patronage networks often benefit at the expense of the less privileged. It can also exacerbate gender, race, and other intersecting inequalities that undermine human security.

7. **Corruption in defence blocks progress towards achieving sustainable development goals.** It undermines the achievement of peace, justice and strong institutions that form the cornerstone of achieving sustainable development.

8. **Corruption in defence can lead to human rights abuses.** It can empower personnel to use excessive force or violence against civilians with impunity, and block effective routes to reporting and accountability, impeding the course of justice for victims of abuses.

9. **Corruption in defence increases gender-based violence.** Corrupt defence and security forces permit abuses of power that increases the risk of various forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including sexual extortion, that adversely impact women and girls.

10. **Corruption in defence can lead to procurement of substandard equipment and insufficient safety standards.** This puts people's lives at risk – both military personnel, who are ill-equipped for the task at hand, and civilians, whose military is unable to effectively protect them.

Kids playing in Khartoum, Sudan © Ammar Nassir, Unsplash

POWER, PILLAGE, AND PROLIFERATION OF WEAPONS: THE CORRUPTION-CONFLICT NEXUS

> **"Sudan was very corrupt in 2019, that's why we revolted against Omar Al-Bashir that year. I was on the front row of the protests. Two of my friends lost their hands because snipers targeted the cameras."**
>
> *[Mazin, interviewed by TI-DS][1]*

MAZIN'S STORY:

Mazin 'Urso' Mohamed Rahman[2] is one of millions of people who rose up against Sudan's ruling powers in 2019. Armed forces enriched and empowered by corruption plunged Sudan into civil war, destroying lives and homes, and displacing millions.

The country has been the scene of myriad forms of corruption in recent years: illicit finance, arms diversion, and gold pillage. Ultimately, weapons acquired through corrupt acts have been turned on civilians, allowing those in power to reinforce their status, wealth, and assets.

Mazin was sick of widespread corruption and its impact on the economy. He was tired of the authorities and state security forces getting away with violence and abuse. In April 2019, he bravely attended and filmed sit-ins – often under sniper fire – organised at military headquarters in the Sudanese capital Khartoum. It was at one of these events that security forces shot at him.

Unchecked weapon flows spurs violence, injury, and death

Lax arms embargoes have seen a steady flow of weapons enter one of the world's most blistering conflict hotspots, with Russian and British firms implicated in supplying military equipment and materiel.[3] Purchases have been made possible from gold pillage and the accrual of tens of millions of dollars from unnamed sources [4,5]

In Sudan, violence driven by private gain is a daily reality, affecting both individuals and the nation as a whole. Mazin still carries photos of his brother, his trousers stained with blood after a brutal stabbing. The assailant took his iPhone, which the family tracked back to a military base. When they tried to investigate further, they were shut down by the police and told soldiers cannot be arrested. In Sudan, the military apparently operates above the law, with no accountability. As Mazin explains, "everything in Sudan happens with connections. If you don't have connections, you will not have any rights".

> **Ultimately, weapons acquired through corrupt acts have been turned on civilians, allowing those in power to reinforce their status, wealth, and assets.**

© Mazin 'Urso' Mohamed Rahman

Mazin's brother was stabbed in a robbery by military personnel. © Mazin Urso Mohamed

Foreign arms fuel civil war, wiping out lives and livelihoods

However, the biggest ordeal the family endured came within weeks of the outbreak of civil war between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the regular Sudanese army in April 2023. RSF shells, potentially originating from Russia, rained down on Khartoum. The mall containing the family's restaurant businesses was obliterated. Their houses and cars were destroyed and looted too.

"Imagine, three restaurants, 60 staff, two houses, everything disappears in front of you," recalls Mazin. "My father is 60 years old. He worked all of his life to build his businesses and now he's lost everything and is depending on his sons. His sons are the only ones in the family with income now, everything else has stopped. During the Covid lockdowns, we had to shut down all the restaurants and still pay all the creditors

Mazin's family restaurant in Khartoum before it was destroyed by RSF shelling in April 2023. © Mazin Urso Mohamed

"Imagine, three restaurants, 60 staff, two houses, everything disappears in front of you," recalls Mazin.

and had no money to pay the staff. With this now you have a different feeling again. This time, nothing is coming back."

The opposing armed forces battling for control of Sudan were able to grow rich and resourced while the population remained poor and too often felt powerless. When the people of Sudan rose up against this corrupt dictatorship in 2019, they could not have predicted that it would be replaced by a bloody internal civil war financed again by corruption. In 2023, that is exactly what happened.

Mazin's family and countless others have borne the brunt of decades of corruption that has infiltrated political and security institutions at all levels. This has created an environment of illicitly armed security forces who are accountable to no one, and has weakened institutional resilience in the defence sector. With power disproportionately in favour of corrupt elites and out-of-control security forces, it is no surprise that ordinary people have been worst hit.

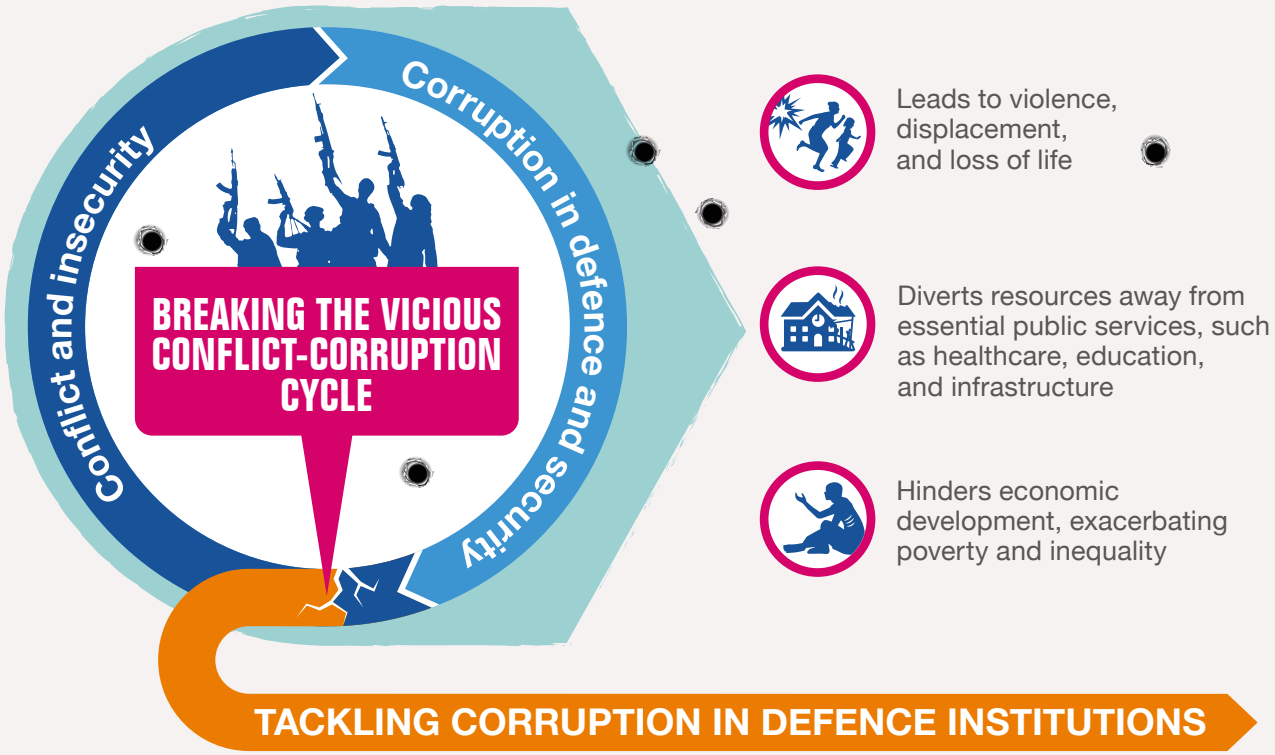
Tackling corruption as a driver of conflict and instability

The role of corruption as a threat to peace, justice, and human security needs to be globally acknowledged. Addressing corruption in the institutions responsible for ensuring security and stability should be prioritised.

International organisations should:

- **Formally recognise at a high level the role corruption plays as a security threat,** and establish consensus on tackling it.
- **Declare countering corruption in defence and security a priority action** in international legal frameworks and policy documents related to peace, security and sustainable development.
- **Accompany international security assistance and security sector reform programming with measures and support to tackle corruption** and improve governance in the defence and security sectors.

The Conflict-Corruption Cycle and its impact on people's lives



SINGAPORE – MYANMAR

The aftermath of the airstrike on Pazigyi village, carried out with weapons acquired through corruption.

HIDDEN ROUTES, CLEAR COSTS: CORRUPTION IN THE ARMS TRADE AND MASS ATROCITIES

> **"I saw people cut to pieces and dead in the smoke."**
>
> *[Witness of Pazigyi atrocities, interviewed by Associated Press][6]*

THE STORY OF PAZIGYI VILLAGE:

On 11 April 2023, the Myanmar government launched an airstrike on Pazigyi village in the Sagaing region, claiming the lives of over 160 civilians, among them 40 children.[7] The villagers had gathered to mark the opening of a National Unity Government People's Administration Office. As the community shared tea and food, a fighter jet bombed the celebrations, followed by a helicopter that indiscriminately fired into the area.

A witness recalled the moment: "I was standing at a short distance from the crowd when a friend of mine contacted me on the phone about the approach of a fighter jet…The jet dropped bombs directly on the crowd, and I jumped into a nearby ditch and hid. A few moments later, when I stood up and looked around, I saw people cut to pieces and dead in the smoke."[8] One report described how, as well as demolishing the new office building, the bombing "struck a field where children were being offered a special free lunch of rice and beef to commemorate the event".[9]

> **The Myanmar military junta has been able to maintain their campaign of violence and repression against their population through consistent imports of arms and raw materials for manufacturing weapons, despite sanctions and existing arms embargoes on the nation.**

According to Tom Andrews, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, the 250 kg bomb used in the Pazigyi village attack was manufactured by the domestic KaPaSa weapons factories.[10] The operations of these factories have been sustained by the supply of raw materials and equipment from private entities operating out of Singapore, casting a chillingly long shadow with global implications. After Russia and China, Singapore was the third most prolific source of arms to Myanmar following the February 2021 coup, with at least 138 Singapore-based firms serving as intermediaries for the Myanmar military in the subsequent period.[11]

Violence and repression escalate as arms dealers game the system

The Myanmar military junta has been able to maintain their campaign of violence and repression against their population through consistent imports of arms and raw materials for manufacturing weapons, despite sanctions and existing arms embargoes on the nation. The UN revealed that between February 2021 and May 2023, Myanmar was able to import over US$1 billion in arms and materials, including advanced weapons systems, spare parts for fighter jets, raw materials and manufacturing equipment for domestic weapons production, despite existing measures to prevent such imports.[12]

The UN's report found that "the Myanmar military and its arms dealers have figured out how to game the system. That's because sanctions are not being adequately enforced and because arms dealers linked to the junta have been able to create shell companies to avoid them".[13] Front or 'shell' companies are entities established in a jurisdiction, often without physical presence or employees, for the sole purpose of insulating the real beneficial owner (the individual or company in whose interests the company operates) from certain disclosure and legal obligations.

> **Thousands of people have been killed and at least 1.5 million displaced as the junta has attempted to expand its hold on the country's more remote states and regions.**

People raise their voices against the military regime, Myanmar © Saw Wunna, Unsplash

Village near the river in the Mandalay city in Myanmar © Stéphane Bidouze, Adobe Stock

Arms trade loopholes enable crimes against humanity

The attack on Pazigyi is just one of many horrific assaults on the civilian population carried out by junta forces since the coup. There have been numerous similar attacks on villages and groups of civilians, which the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has described as "atrocities amounting to probable war crimes and crimes against humanity".[14,15] Thousands of people have been killed and at least 1.5 million displaced as the junta has attempted to expand its hold on the country's more remote states and regions. Myanmar's military junta has also been implicated in using sexual violence as a weapon of war.[16]

The harrowing story of the Pazigyi villagers is a stark example of how shady networks of arms dealers, intermediary companies, and private entities use corrupt means and exploit weaknesses in the global export system to escape scrutiny, while committing crimes and dodging sanctions from the safety of the shadows.

Strengthening controls and closing the loopholes to prevent corruption in the arms trade

Governments need to play their part in strengthening global arms control systems against corrupt practice by:

- **Sanctioning arms dealing networks** that enable the breaking of arms embargoes.
- **Undertaking enhanced scrutiny over supply chains and networks implicated in arms transfers and associated materials and equipment,** across jurisdictions and sectors, including brokers, intermediaries, and enablers.
- **Requiring private companies to conduct heightened due diligence on supply chains,** and to have adequate transparency and compliance systems in place.
- **Making laws for beneficial ownership transparency and registers of beneficial ownership** in industries that enable the circumvention of sanctions and other illicit transfer of arms, including financial services and banks.

Corruption in the Arms Trade

Usage of shell companies and exploitation of loopholes allow corrupt actors throughout the supply chain to avoid scrutiny and escape accountability.

Protesters chant slogan songs during a protest to commemorate one year anniversary of #EndSARS, a protest against a military attack on protesters at Lekki tollgate in Lagos, Nigeria. © Olukayode Jaiyeola/NurPhoto/Shutterstock

ROGUE FORCES: HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE AT THE HANDS OF OUT-OF-CONTROL SECURITY FORCES

> **"Our region is becoming more and more unsafe. People are harassed, asked for bribes, and their human rights are violated by security personnel and nothing happens when people complain. We are worried that if things carry on in this way, what happened in the North of Nigeria will happen to us in the South-East."**
>
> *[Sandra, interviewed by TI-DS][17]*

SANDRA'S STORY:

Sandra[18] lives in Ebonyi state in southeast Nigeria, a region which has seen a troubling surge in insecurity over recent years. The trend is tied to opaque decision-making and resource allocation which have allowed corruption to proliferate across the security services. In her work at a local NGO, Sandra has watched Ebonyi state go from being relatively safe to being plagued by frequent security challenges, with state-sponsored paramilitary groups tasked with providing security committing human rights violations across the region. One of these groups, the Ebubeagu, has often perpetrated violence against civilians.[19]

Sandra herself has experienced harassment at the hands of this group. She explained that checkpoints in the region are flashpoints for corruption too, with personnel searching people's phones for their account balance, and taking bribes – all without any fear of punishment. Threats to the lives and personal security of citizens as a result of failing to comply with demands for money has led to a pattern of extortion, particularly against young people profiled to belong to certain social groups.

Civil society bodies pushed for the Ebubeagu group to be blacklisted or dissolved, and it was officially disbanded in February 2023 for violence against civilians and human rights abuses.[20] It was subsequently replaced by Ebonyi Neighbourhood Watch. However, according to Sandra, the new group is made up of many of the same members, so the same issues remain. Local civil society organisations like hers are now looking for ways to push for reporting mechanisms on the misconduct of security groups, which currently do not exist. As Sandra explained, "brutality and extortion are becoming normalised, and this will not change if nothing is done to bring accountability". The #EndSARS protests of 2020-21, a series of nationwide demonstrations in Nigeria against police brutality, specifically by the federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) exemplified public outrage at the phenomenon of violence and corruption in the security sector, with no accountability nor justice in sight.[21]

Sandra's account highlights a deeply ingrained culture of impunity and misconduct amongst the security forces in the country. A system that lacks transparency, is corrupt, and has impunity built in from the top – with no external oversight and scrutiny to push for accountability of spending or decision-making – allows a culture of impunity to permeate all levels of decision-making and operations.

Local civil society organisations like Sandra's are now looking for ways to push for reporting mechanisms on the misconduct of security groups, which currently do not exist.

Woman travels as a passenger on a motorbike © Godong, Adobe Stock

Security votes – a tumour in the state budget

This poisonous culture is a product of Nigeria's 'security votes' system. Used by successive governments since 1999, these are opaque funds disbursed at the discretion of public officials. Transacted mostly in cash, security vote spending is not subject to legal oversight or independent audit because of its ostensibly sensitive nature. In theory, they are designed to cover unforeseen security needs, but in reality many have become slush funds for corrupt officials. Groups like the Ebonyi Neighbourhood Watch are funded through this mechanism, and the lack of scrutiny over how they are selected, contracted, and deployed leaves them unaccountable to the populations they are supposed to be protecting. Meanwhile, even federal security forces are often seen to be serving the political interests of those with access to funds and decision-making power through security votes, at the expense of their citizens. Sandra explained how local civil defence corps seemed to be at the dispensation of the State Governor, who is purse-holder of the security votes for the state and supports the corps financially.

Transparency International Defence & Security calculated that total expenditure on security votes as of 2017/2018 added up to more than 70 percent of the annual budget of the Nigeria Police Force. It was also more than the Nigerian Army's annual budget, and exceeded the Nigerian Navy and Nigerian Air Force's annual budget combined. [22] A Nigerian news outlet calculated in 2021 that these secretive, unaccounted-for, cash expenditures by state governors and local government chairmen alone totalled US$455 million (N375 billion) annually.[23]

In Nigeria, popular and official views on security votes diverge sharply. When it comes to public opinion, the words "security vote" are synonymous with corruption and abuse of power. Politicians and security officials, on the other hand, argue that the funds are needed to subsidise the operations of Nigeria's overstretched and underfunded federal security agencies. State officials claim this practice is necessary while allowing the federal government to shift the cost of national security activities onto the states with no accountability for how those funds are spent. As a result, security votes have become a "cancerous tumour" in the state budget, according to one senior state official.[24]

Protest to end SARS brutality in Nigeria © Tobi Oshinnaike, Unsplash

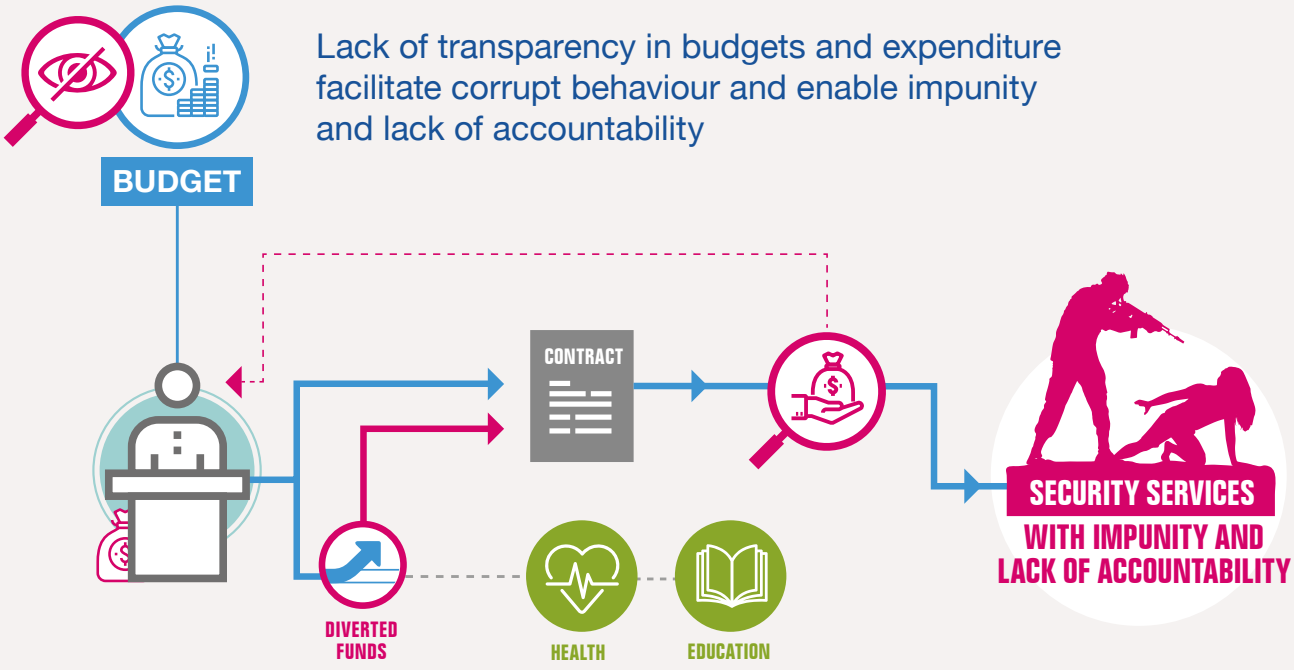
Transparency as the default: Improving access to information in the defence sectors to ensure accountability

The defence sector lacks a fundamental level of transparency that is crucial to ensure accountability. Freedom of information legislation frequently contains national security exemptions that are vague or overreach, giving defence institutions a sweeping mandate to classify information by labelling it critical to national security.

- **Defence institutions should have clear and publicly available rules for withholding and classifying national security information.** Currently, secrecy is often the norm and transparency is the exception. While some information in the sector may need to remain legitimately classified, secrecy should be an exception, rather than the rule. Exceptions must be proportionate and necessary, and transparency being the default approach. Frameworks for access to information should also include additional safeguards, such as time limitations on classification of information, and guidance on the application of tests balancing the public interest against the concrete harm of releasing specific information, ideally along the lines of the Global Principles on National Security and the Right to Information (the Tshwane Principles).

- **Defence budgets should contain disaggregated expenditure information, and should be made publicly available.** There may be exceptions made for sensitive areas, but there should be clear and robust oversight of the full budget. One percent or less of defence and security expenditure should be dedicated to spending on secret items relating to national security and the intelligence services. Where secret budgets are used, the appropriate legislative committee or members of the legislature should be provided with extensive information on all spending on secret items.

Opaque budgets and unaccountable security forces



DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

MONUSCO conducts joint operations with Congolese forces in Beni region © UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

A CORRUPT PEACE: THE EPIDEMIC OF SEXUAL EXTORTION BY PEACEKEEPERS

Survival sex, or the exchange of sex for access to basic survival resources or social services, is a form of corruption known as sexual extortion.[25,26]

GRACE'S STORY:

Grace[27] was a young girl and still at school when she met and became sexually involved with a Uruguayan peacekeeper, Javier, in her home city of Beni, in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). She soon became pregnant, and Javier returned to his native Uruguay, never to be heard from again. Alone, Grace was unable to cover the costs of pregnancy and childbirth, and felt she had no choice but to exchange sex for money, food, and hygiene products.

Grace's story is tragically echoed in the experiences of countless adolescent girls – as well as boys and women – who, in similarly dire circumstances, have been coerced into trading sexual favours for food and basic goods needed for survival.[28] The UN has compiled a database of cases of sexual abuse allegations against peacekeeping personnel, including transactional sex, rape, and exploitative relationships.[29] The database includes 645 cases from UN peacekeeping missions between January 2015 and September 2023; 166 of these cases involve transactional sex.

Sexual exploitation by corrupt peacekeepers harms women and girls

There is a well-documented and deeply troubling trend of peacekeepers engaging in sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of populations they are meant to protect.[30,31] Some forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse also constitute a form of corruption known as sexual extortion, in which those entrusted with power sexually exploit those dependent on that power. This can take a range of forms, including sex extorted for access to basic goods or services required for survival, for access to healthcare, documents, transit, employment, receipt of a salary, as well as to avoid the threat of detention.[32,33] For decades, international missions meant to protect and support local communities have been perpetuating the phenomenon of survival sex and women and girls have been worst affected.[34,35,36]

A UN report from its mission in the DRC, formally the United Nations Organisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) found that many of its officials fell into one of three troubling categories:[37]

1. Those who had participated in acts that violated UN standards of conduct relating to sexual exploitation and abuse. These were individuals who had wielded their positions of authority to exploit those they were meant to protect.
2. Those who were aware of such acts and actively covered up for their friends and colleagues; this complicity blocked the path to justice and accountability for survivors.
3. Those who knew of these violations and chose to look the other way.

Residents in Beni region greet peacekeepers passing by in a MONUSCO armoured personnel carrier. © UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

There is a well-documented and deeply troubling trend of peacekeepers engaging in sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of populations they are meant to protect.

This has been a pattern for the past several decades across peacekeeper and humanitarian deployments in the Caribbean, Africa, and elsewhere. Repeated scandals have led to increased action from the UN and its member states on the issue, but gaps in prevention, accountability, and response mechanisms have limited efforts to address the problem. Risks and fears of retaliation against whistleblowers have prevented perpetrators from facing the law, leaving survivors still searching for justice.[38]

MONUSCO Deputy Force Commander Major General Jean Baillaud (left) meets with FARDC troops during the operation.
© UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti

Safeguarding vulnerable civilians from sexual forms of corruption in military and peacekeeping missions

To address the risk of personnel engaging with impunity in corrupt practices including sexual extortion or sextortion, defence and security institutions should:

- **Recognise sexual extortion as a distinct form of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse as well as a form of corruption,** and systematically include these in risk assessments for UN missions.
- **Raise awareness of sexual extortion among deployed personnel, humanitarian actors, and affected populations,** including through integrating gender and Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) into mandatory anti-corruption training.
- **Ensure gender and child-sensitive reporting mechanisms that are adapted to the local context,** including through enhancing protections from retaliation, and encouraging and protecting those from within the institutions who blow the whistle on wrongdoing.
- **Increase the focus on investigating instances of corruption on missions,** and hold to account individuals who have been found to engage in corruption, to deter the corrupt and shift the institutional culture. The results of investigations and their recommendations should be published and whenever possible made public. Sexual extortion should be recorded as a distinct form of SEA in the database of allegations so patterns of sexual extortion can be better traced.
- **Ensure adequate resources and protections are in place to assist and support victims.**

Sexual extortion of vulnerable people during conflict

AFGHANISTAN

Kabul skyline, © Adobe Stock

FUEL ON THE FIRE: THE HUMAN COST OF FAILED SECURITY SECTOR REFORM

> **"[The International community] were pouring in money to solve the problems in the security sector but it was actually like pouring fuel on the fire… because there was no accountability or transparency."**
>
> *[Shoja, interviewed by TI-DS][39]*

SHOJA'S STORY:

Working with international missions in Kabul, Shoja[40] witnessed first-hand entire chains of corruption ingrained in the Afghan security sector. At the highest levels, he saw a system of patronage that kept ministers, MPs, and their networks in power through bribery and the trading of political favours and influence. At the opposite end, lower-level security officials would siphon off public funds and solicit bribes from citizens in return for access to public services, which they controlled.

The impact was felt most acutely by the people whose needs the government was supposed to serve. Citizens' rights, protections, and access to public services were ultimately at stake as corruption corroded the state's ability to deliver for its people and eroded any prospect of accountability. Shoja described how families sent their

sons to the military as a lifeline in the years before 2021 – it was the only sector with money, and the only viable option to earn a living.

But far from providing a livelihood for their families, soldiers were often left impoverished. As commanders skimmed money off budgets, soldiers were left to fund basic provisions that the military should have provided: food, travel back home, even their military uniforms. Even when killed in service, soldiers' families struggled to get the financial support they were entitled to as compensation. Often, they found that military commanders would not sign a paper to say that the soldier had been killed until they received a bribe of up to US$700 from the family.

Corruption crushes the Afghan army, leaving the population unprotected and vulnerable

The Unites States and its allies invested heavily in security sector reform, building the Afghan army and security forces over the almost two decades preceding 2021. The United States alone allocated nearly $90 billion in security sector assistance to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) while the United Kingdom provided over £400 million in aid over six years to fund the Afghan security services.[41,42] However, this mass injection of resources only served to inflame already existing corrupt practices, and with no oversight, the system collapsed. Soldiers were not paid, and equipment was not delivered or went missing. Public resources were often deployed in the interests of political and military elites, rather than the citizens for whom they were intended.

The international community knew about widespread corruption within the Afghan security sector, but it was not until 2007 – six years into the mission – that NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan acknowledged tackling corruption as part of its task.[43] Security sector reform initiatives and aid were administered without the necessary focus on this critical menace to both national and human security.

A critical issue was the 'ghost soldiers' phenomenon. When the Taliban advanced on Kabul in August 2021, it became apparent that the Afghan army, which far outnumbered the Taliban on paper, was facing severe shortages. It later emerged that troop numbers had been inflated by as much as six times.[44] Many soldiers simply do not exist, and in other cases deserters were never

An elderly Afghan man is confronted by two Afghan National Army soldiers during a joint mission conducted by Polish Task Force White Eagle in eastern Afghanistan.© Ryanzo W. Perez, Shutterstock

Assistants help an Afghan man to put on and practice walking with artificial limbs at the orthopedic hospital of the Red Cross Institute.
© Samiullah Popal/EPA-EFE, Shutterstock

The hospital was demanding payment despite the vast amount of funding and support the military was receiving from the international community, and the fact that treatment in military hospitals was supposed to be free of charge.

struck from the record as officers would keep their bank details and withdraw their salaries. The Taliban ultimately took control of most of Afghanistan in just 10 days.[45]

The difference between saving or losing a leg

One day, Shoja was drinking tea with his father in Kabul, a retired security official who had been leading the police academy in Afghanistan, when his father received a call from his neighbour. The neighbour's son had been injured in battle in the Paktia province and was in a military hospital with shrapnel in his leg. Doctors said that he required a complex operation to save his leg, and he would have to pay for it. The hospital was demanding payment despite the vast amount of funding and support the military was receiving from the international community, and the fact that treatment in military hospitals was supposed to be free of charge. If he did not pay, he would need a high-ranking official to intervene on his behalf – to call in a favour with the commander of the military hospital, to get them to perform the operation.

The neighbour begged Shoja's father to call the commander of the hospital and use his influence as a former security official to ask him to approve his son's operation. His father did not call immediately – this was not the way this should work. But when the neighbour called back three hours later, saying the doctors had arrived to amputate his son's leg, Shoja's father made the call. He told the commander that he was the former director of the police academy, that the son was a relative and to please take care of him.

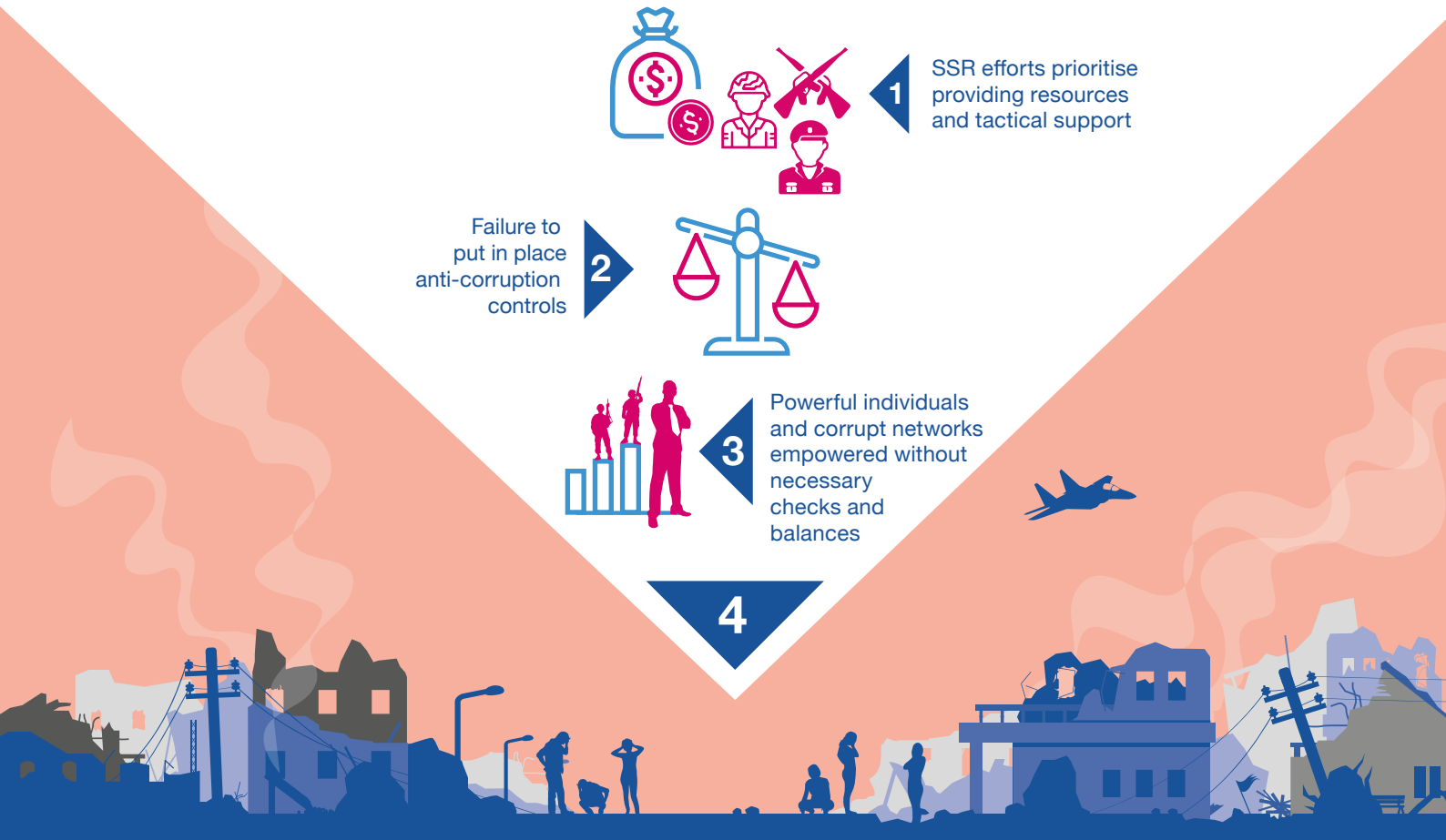
A few hours later, the operation was completed successfully and the neighbour's son had his leg saved. Now, Shoja says, "Whenever I see somebody who has lost one of his legs and he has worked in the military, I think that nobody has cared about him, otherwise he would not have lost his leg."

Avoiding guaranteed failure: addressing corruption to enable successful security sector reform

International stabilisation and peacebuilding efforts, including support for security sector reform (SSR), need to prioritise building accountability and institutional integrity. SSR actors should:

- **Recognise anti-corruption as a fundamental principle of SSR**, and acknowledge that it is a critical success factor within SSR efforts.
- **Conduct comprehensive corruption risk assessments in the security sector**, considering political economy, gender dimensions, and prior anti-corruption efforts. Collaborate with national actors and specialists to integrate corruption analysis into SSR assessments, and design reform approaches accordingly. Do not shy away from uncomfortable findings – when risk of corruption is identified, address it.
- **Strengthen independent oversight mechanisms and establishing frameworks to monitor the implementation and effectiveness of anti-corruption measures in SSR processes.** Ensure an appropriate oversight body has the mandate and ability to monitor and evaluate anti-corruption measures, ensuring sufficient independence, resources, and authority for investigations and recommendations. Regularly evaluate progress, address challenges, and publish reports to ensure transparency and accountability.

The human cost of Security Sector Reform (SSR) that ignores and exacerbates the threat of corruption



Morning in Kabul, Afghanistan © Mohammad Rahmani, Unsplash

STRENGTHENING ANTI-CORRUPTION CONTROLS IN THE DEFENCE SECTOR TO SAFEGUARD LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS

The stories told here point to a catastrophic breakdown in systems of accountability within defence and security. When these systems that prevent the abuse of entrusted power fail, a culture of impunity and abuse prevails. The victims are inevitably the people who hold the least power.

Corruption, especially in defence and security, threatens the lives and livelihoods of individuals and societies. It deprives people of their fundamental rights.

Although some argue that the victims of corruption are difficult to identify, the harm it causes is undeniable and far-reaching. It not only results in economic losses but also perpetuates a consistent denial of the impartial application of the rule of law and hinders access to justice. While criminal prosecutions should be attempted, they are insufficient to combat corruption, and legal frameworks often fail to address the abuses and harm endured by victims.

Transparency International Defence & Security advocates for strengthening the systems in place to minimise the risks of corruption illustrated through these stories, and for ensuring that processes to access justice and accountability are sound. Anti-corruption, based on the principles of transparency, accountability, independent oversight, and civil society engagement, should be fully integrated throughout defence and security institutions and processes.

By putting people at the core and adopting the following foundations of institutional integrity, authorities can lead the way in addressing the impact of corruption in defence and security on individuals and promoting accountability, human security, and human rights for all.

1. **Strengthen anti-corruption measures in defence**
   Reinforce governance of the defence sector with integrity measures by strengthening anti-corruption laws, regulations, and codes of conduct. Leave no room for corruption to take root in defence systems. Refer to Transparency International Defence & Security's Government Defence Integrity Index (GDI) for guidance on good practice for defence sector resilience against corruption.

2. **Increase transparency in defence decision-making**
   Open up the secretive world of defence policy-making, budgets, and spending, ensuring they are accountable and bringing corruption risks and misconduct to light.

3. **Mobilise agents of change**
   Rally civil society to the cause. Encourage their active participation as agents of transformation, working hand in hand to drive out corruption in defence and security.

4. **Protect whistleblowers**
   Enact robust whistleblower protection systems that encourage and shield those willing to stand up and speak the truth.

5. **Promote global anti-corruption efforts**
   Join and lead the fight against corruption. Join international sanctions and agreements, including the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), and resist defence exceptionalism in these frameworks.

Terminal Dr, Juba, South Sudan © Chetan Sharma, Unsplash

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Transparency International Defence & Security
10 Queen Street Place
London
EC4R 1BE

ti-defence.org
twitter.com/@TI_Defence

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