

Countdown to Catastrophe

THE MPILA AMMUNITION DEPOT EXPLOSIONS

On 4 March 2012, a series of explosions destroyed several military barracks in the Mpila area of Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo (RoC). The blasts devastated two densely populated districts of the capital, claiming hundreds of lives, injuring thousands, and displacing well over 100,000 people.

A number of warning signs were ignored or simply not recognized.

The Mpila explosions provide a tragic example of how inadequate ammunition management practices can have a severe impact on the local population and the economy. The international community swiftly contributed significant emergency funding and coordinated explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) and humanitarian relief activities with non-governmental organizations. The magnitude of the event and its immediate consequences drew considerable media coverage and triggered efforts to tackle the underlying problem of poor stockpile management. Since then, however, national priorities and international donor funding have moved on. Yet the root causes of the explosions have still not been properly addressed, nor have their broad socio-economic consequences been fully remedied.

The explosions had macroeconomic effects throughout the country.

This chapter complements the findings of an EU-commissioned evaluation of the effectiveness of the post-blast clearance and risk education activities in and around Mpila. It builds on the EU evaluation report, published in March 2013, but widens the perspective to focus on: (i) the long-term ammunition procurement and stockpiling practices that led to the explosions, and (ii) the direct and indirect consequences of the blasts on the city's population, the country's finances, and government policy.



A plume of smoke billowing over the site of the explosions at the munitions depot in Mpila, Brazzaville, is visible from across the river, 4 March 2012, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. © Marc Hofer/AFP Photo

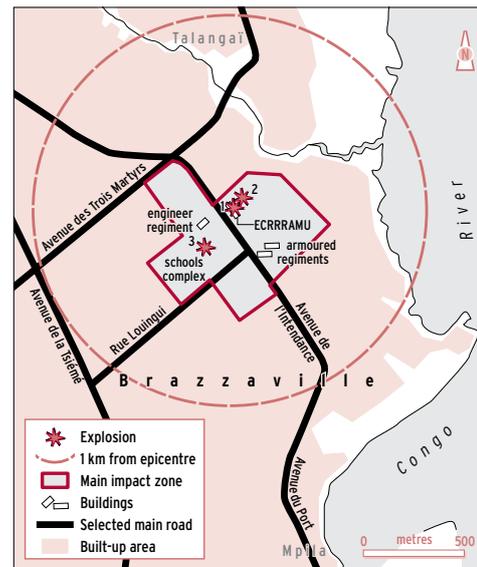
Among the chapter's main findings are the following:

- In a matter of minutes, the explosions killed at least 300 people, injured more than 2,500, and left more than 121,000 homeless. The number of dead probably far exceeds 300 since the Ministry of Defence (MoD) did not officially report military fatalities.
- According to ammunition technicians and EOD specialists familiar with the event, inadequate ammunition stockpile management is the root cause of the Mpila ammunition depot explosions.
- The quantity of ammunition originally contained in the depots before the blasts is unknown, yet EOD teams destroyed more than 200 tonnes of UXO—representing more than 39 tonnes in net explosive content—during the subsequent clearance efforts between March 2012 and April 2013.
- The ammunition types destroyed, which were not recent, included a mix of pyrotechnics, small arms ammunition, grenades, mines, large-calibre projectiles, rockets, missiles, and aircraft bombs amassed haphazardly in the Mpila depot's explosive storehouses in the late 1970s and 1980s, during the RoC's internal conflicts in the 1990s, and during subsequent disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes.
- The unchecked expansion of the civilian population around an explosive storage area containing such types and quantities of ammunition places more people at higher risk in the case of an explosion.
- The total impact of the explosions was partially estimated—mostly in terms of direct physical damage to the private sector—at more than XAF 336 billion (USD 672 million). Broader economic impacts were significant and long-lasting, with macroeconomic repercussions felt throughout the country.
- The tragedy was preventable. Prior to the explosion, a number of warning signs were ignored by the international donor community or, in the case of the Forces Armées Congolaises (Congolese Armed Forces, or FAC), simply not recognized due to its lack of stockpile management expertise.
- At the time of writing, post-explosion progress in stockpile management practices was slow, indicating a lack of buy-in from RoC authorities, as well as donor fatigue and wariness from potential sponsors.

The research used a wide range of mostly internal documents obtained during the initial EU-funded evaluation, including reports from the FAC, international and non-governmental organizations, and the EOD coordination centre. The Survey complemented these sources with (i) follow-up interviews with a broad range of field actors, (ii) expert background papers, (iii) data from the United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database, (iv) Survey research, including the Unplanned Explosions at Munitions Sites project, and (v) other open source and media reports. The Survey also submitted more than 1,700 ammunition photos to an EOD specialist for identification of ammunition types.

This chapter begins by looking back. A chronological description of the Mpila ammunition depot explosions—and their root causes—leads to a discussion on the types and quantities of ammunition that were in the depot prior to the explosion, as well as the probable origins of this ordnance. The second section details the impact of the explosions on the local population and infrastructure, government finances, and the country's socio-economic development. The third and final section highlights the opportunities the RoC had to avoid the explosion, the country's multilateral commitments for stockpile management, and future perspectives. 📌

Map 5.2 Mpila munitions depot explosions



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