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Explosives smuggling in Southern Africa represents a dual threat to public safety and regional stability.

By Edknowledge Mandikwaza,

Explosives smuggling across Southern Africa, particularly along the Zimbabwe–South Africa corridor, poses a dual threat of enabling organised crime and creating opportunities for extremist violence. On 16 April 2026 a South Africa-bound commuter omnibus suspected to have been carrying explosives [exploded](#), killing 12 people on board, along the Bulawayo-Beitbridge road. The explosives were allegedly going to be smuggled into South Africa where their [market](#) is huge – for use in illegal mines and also in armed robberies especially, cash-in-transit heists. One week earlier, the South African Border Management Authority (BMA) had intercepted a truck driver at the Beitbridge Border post carrying [smuggled bulk mining explosives](#) worth approximately between [R770 000](#) and R1 million (about USD 61 000). Many explosives smuggling cases have been recorded in the same corridor - highlighting the scale and gravity of the challenge. Addressing this threat requires a coordinated regional strategy to stop the convergence of organised crime and extremism, thereby improving public safety and regional stability.

The challenge with explosives smuggling

While most smuggled explosives currently fuel organised crime in South Africa, the known nexus between [natural resource trafficking](#) and violent extremism in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado and Eastern DRC suggests a high-risk pathway for terrorist use in the near future. South Africa, itself, has been linked to [extremist groups](#) with some citizens having joined them. Predictably, in the future these explosives may be abused for terror attacks, especially with the country's growing public discontent over governance issues such as unemployment and [xenophobic](#) migration and economic nationalism. The aforementioned issues, coupled with the proliferation of explosives creates a fertile ground for violent conflict.

Tactics used by criminals smuggling these explosives usually include truck drivers concealing them in their cargo while women are used as couriers on public transport, especially when using commuter omnibuses and long-distance buses. In some instances, criminals have exploited funeral parlour hearses to hide explosives in coffins. Some have also used illegal border crossings with the explosives in their bags. The same routes and approaches are used by criminal networks trafficking drugs and humans as well as small arms.

The current responses to explosives smuggling largely remain securitised, yet the threat scale demands a broader regional strategy. This is more urgent given the [expanding](#) violent extremism in the region. Responses should employ holistic socio-economic and political approaches integrating high level triad-inclusion of security institutions, mining companies and civil society¹ in monitoring their movement and use, particularly in unregulated spaces. Porous borders, weak inter-agency coordination, and corruption among enforcement bodies also enable continued smuggling not just for explosives but many other things that aids transnational organised crime and extremism. The existing [SADC Protocol](#) on the Control of Firearms, Ammunition and Other Related Materials (2001) which should be a

¹ Relevant CSOs include those involved in mining and environmental monitoring and advocacy

significant starting point in combating these crimes has failed to curb explosives trafficking due to poor enforcement and lack of harmonisation.

Policy gaps and responses

To address the escalating dual threats of explosives smuggling in the region, there is a need to control the manufacturing and movement of explosives not only for public safety and preventing their use in illegal mines and cash heists but also to prevent them from being accessed and used in extremist terror attacks. This can be made possible by operationalising the SADC Protocol on the Control of Firearms, Ammunition and Other Related Materials of 2001. The Protocol was designed to harmonise legislation, strengthen border management, and curb illicit trafficking which includes not only weapons but also explosives. According to [Willem Els](#) this should be complemented by a SADC protocol on explosives control that will facilitate this harmonisation as well as a clear implementation plan fostering cooperation among regional and national bodies responsible for explosives control. This will be a specialised instrument focusing on explosives safe handling and preventing diversion into illicit markets.

Corruption within law enforcement agencies remains a critical obstacle to effective explosives control, undermining border security and regulatory enforcement. To address this, the SADC Protocol Against [Corruption](#) must be implemented in tandem with the Protocol on the Control of Firearms, Ammunition and Other Related Materials. Because explosives often move along the same smuggling routes as firearms and ammunition, and are moved by overlapping criminal networks, national institutions and task forces responsible for operationalising the Protocol on Combatting Illicit Drugs and the [SADC Transnational Organised Crime Strategy](#) should be integrated into the regional response. A coordinated and grounded operationalisation of these protocols – supported by strong institutional collaboration across customs, police, military, and intelligence agencies, —will harmonise member states' laws on the manufacture, possession, storage, transportation and use of explosives, while significantly reducing cross-border trafficking.

Besides, SADC countries must also adopt a synchronised barcoding of explosives to ensure easy tracking and control of the products in-country and within the region. This should be complemented by coordinated intelligence-sharing and investment in detection and oversight to prevent criminal syndicates proliferation and creating opportunities for extremist empowerment. Manufacturing and mining companies failing to comply with both national and regional explosives control regulations must be held accountable. Hefty penalties must be introduced for deterrence purposes. However, this strategy will only prove to be effective if all SADC member countries have the political will to enforce regional protocols and sharing intelligence data.

More critically, on one hand, the Zimbabwean government as the primary transit state, must enforce its own Explosives Act (Chapter 10.08) and Minerals and Mining ([Explosives](#)) Regulations (2012) more rigorously. Its law enforcement agents must strengthen surveillance on explosives manufacturing, control and use. On the other hand, South Africa, as the primary destination, must lead the push for regional harmonisation of various protocols and their enforcement. The SADC Secretariat should also place explosives control on the agenda of the next Summit of Heads of State to show urgency.

Conclusion

In view of expanding violent extremism, explosives smuggling in Southern Africa should no longer be viewed as a mere border crime issue. The fact that it has killed 12 people in a single bus explosion, fuels organised crime across the region, and presents a clear pathway for violent extremism means a

regional strategic response is urgently needed. The existing SADC Firearms Protocol (2001) provides a legal basis for action, but it has never been operationalised for explosives. A standalone explosives control protocol, synchronised barcoding, intelligence sharing, and civil society integration are urgently needed. SADC leaders must act decisively by operationalising existing protocols, adopting specialised instruments, and investing in detection and oversight. Without political will and regional cooperation, the region risks facing a convergence of organised crime and violent extremism that could destabilise Southern Africa's fragile peace and security landscape. In fact, without this action, the next explosion or the first extremist attack using smuggled explosives, is not a matter of if, but when.

Specific recommendations

Conduct pilot synchronised barcoding of explosives in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

- Establish joint intelligence-sharing mechanisms across SADC member states on explosives trafficking.
- Engage civil society organisations, especially those involved in mining and environmental advocacy, in monitoring access and use of explosives in unregulated spaces.
- Create a regional explosives control task force for regional response and coordination.
- Integrate explosives control into the SADC Transnational Organised Crime Strategy and Anti-corruption strategy implementation.
- Introduce hefty penalties for companies failing to comply with national and regional regulations on explosives manufacturing, transportation and use.
- Develop a SADC Protocol on Explosives Control, harmonising laws on manufacture, possession, storage, and transport.
- Strengthen anti-corruption measures within border and enforcement agencies.

Written by **Edknowledge Mandikwaza, Senior Researcher and Regional Team Leader** at the Southern Africa Centre for Mediation and Extremism Prevention (SACMEP).

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