

I'm safer in Yemen

Yemen is an arms bazaar, but has far fewer firearms than the U.S., with its almost one gun per person

SANA'A, YEMEN

Hey, what's going on over there?

First, a Stoney Creek 15-year-old gets an AK-47, past customs, in the mail from an American Internet-game buddy. Then some American cruisers scream over the border in a movie-like scene, chasing a suspicious truck, only for it to kill some poor lady moments later in Niagara Falls, Canada.

Having grown up in that region, I guess things have changed since the evening I strolled across the Rainbow Bridge to see the sights, gripping as they are, on the U.S. side of The Falls.

But if you want real border action, come to Yemen. Visit Sada, a town just south of the border of big, oil-rich cousin Saudi Arabia. In Sada, you can get weapons at an arms souk like you get fruits and vegetables.

Thousands shop in the open-air market for arms that come from places like China, Russia, Belgium and, heck, even Israel. Guns of all shapes and sizes are everywhere. A larger item, like an 85mm surface-to-surface missile, goes for US \$2,500. Anti-aircraft missiles, while not on display anymore, can also be had if the price is right.

And getting stuff over to Saudi? Forget the mail. Try donkeys. You bet. Donkeys easily carry illicit goods past unsuspecting border guards. One good swat to the backside, and a trained mule can go through rugged mountains and cross at some unknown point of the 1,350 km-wide border, then return on its own to Yemen.

The Saudis - who export their own weapons, namely militant religious ideology and terror money - blame the porous border for things like the terror bombings in Riyadh last May. Since then, border patrols have managed to seize at least 90,000 rounds of ammunition 2,000 sticks of dynamite and hundreds of guns and bazookas.

Thus, the wall. It was going up in 20 kilometres of neutral territory. Established after decades of border disputes, the land was reserved for local tribes and vital grazing pasture. Yemenis got so livid over the treaty-breaking intrusion, they compared it to Israel's West Bank barrier, a blow as low as any Arab could ever dish another.

Thankfully, the whole thing blew over after Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh flew to Saudi's royal princes in Riyadh. They smiled and hugged and kissed like good

men in this part of the world do. Wall construction stopped, and everyone agreed to do a better job harnessing things like those out-of-control donkeys.

It won't be easy. Even here in the capital, where there are far fewer guns than in the countryside, it's not uncommon to see semi-automatic Kalashnikovs, the Russian version of AK-47s, bandied about. Once I saw a pistol fired aimlessly in the air in front of a restaurant. The guy was obviously upset over his food.

Nonetheless, despite its wild-west reputation, Yemen is not the most heavily-armed country on the planet. It's second. Believe it or not, the country 90 minutes down the road from you packs significantly more heat.

For years, authorities believed Yemen had 60 million guns, or three per person. But unlike in Michigan, you can't get a gun here when opening a bank account. (And that's not because most Yemenis don't use banks.)

And now the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey, the authoritative voice on what's happening with weaponry worldwide, confirms that of 639 million firearms on Earth, Yemen, in fact, has 10 million at most, one gun for every two Yemenis. Meanwhile, the Americans have about 250 million. That's almost one per person. Finland (Finland?) takes third, and South Africa has, by far, the most gun murders.

The good news is that there are slightly fewer small arms on the world's streets these days. New government laws and a decline in wars in the 1990s have helped. The bad news is that a couple of people have been shot dead somewhere during the time it's taken you to read this.

Such things will always be terribly troubling. But, despite appearances, at least things over here aren't as dangerous as they seem. In fact, it may be safer here than it is where you are. Imagine that. And Yemen's guns aren't even registered.

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