

Arrested development as gun fingerprinting exercise stalls



A Police Fire Brigade officer aims a gun at a civilian whom he accused of throwing stones at them at Nakivubo Park Yard Market, Kampala, in 2013. PHOTOS/ FILE

The debate has been reignited following the fatal shooting of journalist Joe Nam. Observers reckon that the identity of the shooter would have been established had the objectives of the firearm fingerprinting been followed to the letter.

BY YAHUDU KITUNZI

Despite government pledges to introduce a gun fingerprinting system to track and identify firearms used in crimes, the initiative remains stalled. Fresh killings continue to raise questions about Uganda's ability to investigate and deter violent crime, and about whether the long-promised forensic tool will ever move from rhetoric to reality.

Security experts say the project, launched years ago, has failed to deliver meaningful results. The promise, first made as part of broader efforts to modernise the country's security infrastructure, was welcomed as a critical step toward strengthening forensic investigations. Under the proposed system, every firearm held by security agencies would be registered and its unique ballistic signature recorded, allowing investigators to match bullets recovered from crime scenes to specific weapons.

At the time, officials argued that such a system would not only improve the speed and accuracy of investigations but also enhance accountability within the security forces. It was expected to serve as a deterrent against the misuse of firearms and help solve complex criminal cases, including targeted killings and armed robberies. Yet, five years on, there is little public evidence that the system was ever implemented.

Two steps back, one in front

Mr Job Kiija, the associate director of Innovations for Democratic Engagement and Action (IDEA), says the delay reflects deeper issues of institutional accountability, the erosion of the social contract,

and the urgent need for structural oversight in the security sector.

"This gap suggests a reactive governance style, one that prioritises political optics after major crimes rather than sustained, systemic follow-through. When such systems remain incomplete or siloed, bureaucratic inertia and inconsistent funding undermine the State's commitment to tracking firearms and deterring gun-related violence," Mr Kiija tells *Weekend Monitor*.

"When technological 'solutions' do not translate into resolved cases, citizens perceive institutional incompetence or selective justice. This disillusionment fosters governance fatigue, where public faith in the police and Judiciary collapses, and cooperation essential for effective investigations diminishes," he adds. Mr Kiija reckons a Forensic Impact Au-

dit in the Annual Crime Report to track successful prosecutions will do Uganda a world of good. He further urges Parliament to exercise its power of the purse, making security funding contingent on the strict implementation of milestones and legislative deadlines. The effectiveness of gun fingerprinting, he concludes, depends less on the technology itself and more on the political will to subject all security agencies to transparent forensic scrutiny.

The debate has been reignited following the recent fatal shooting of Joe Nam, a journalist and author who wrote a book entitled *The Day Museveni Goes*. Many observers reckon that the motive of the shooting, or at least the identity of the shooter, would have been effortlessly established had the objectives of the firearm fingerprinting been followed to the letter. Others not so much.

"It is not entirely accurate to say that [the] government has not carried out firearm fingerprinting. In fact, by 2022, reports indicated that at least 99.9 percent of all firearms had been fingerprinted. Therefore, the real issue lies elsewhere," Mr Baker Batte, a veteran journalist, observes.

Mr Batte illustrates this with a person-

CRIME STATISTICS

According to the police annual Crime report of 2025, a total of 7,863 cases of robberies were reported to police in 2025, compared to 8,163 in 2024, giving a 3.7 percent decrease. Crimes where lethal weapons were not used numbered 1,317, while aggravated robberies involving the use of lethal weapons such as firearms, knives, hammers, and machetes were 6,546. Out of the total cases of robberies, 2,733 were taken to Court, 1,054 were not proceeded with, while 4,076 are still under inquiry. The same report shows that 2,101 cases of aggravated robbery were

reported to police in 2025, compared to 1,968 cases reported in 2024, giving a 6.7 percent increase. Elsewhere, a total of 786 cases of robbery of cash were reported to police in 2025, compared to 573 in 2024, giving a 37.2 percent increase. Two hundred cases of aggravated robbery of cash were taken to court, 72 were not proceeded with, while 514 are still under inquiry. Kampala Metropolitan Police (KMP) registered the highest number of robberies in 2025, with KMP North leading with 1,007 cases, KMP South with 779, and KMP East with 669, followed by Rwizi with 567 and North Kyoga, with 429.



A Karimojong man surrenders his gun to the Moroto RDC (right) in Katikokile Sub-county, Moroto District, during a disarmament exercise.

al story: when thieves broke into his office and stole computers and hardware, police forensics collected fingerprints from staff. That was the last update they received.

A work in progress?

Unlike countries with integrated national databases—where fingerprints can be cross-referenced instantly—Uganda's system remains fragmented. As one officer told him, fingerprints are stored with the hope that someday they might match a suspect. Without an interlinked database, fingerprinting loses much of its practical value in solving crimes.

Mr Batte further notes that many firearms used in criminal activity are not those registered and fingerprinted, undermining the initiative's effectiveness. He emphasised that Uganda's National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA) already captures biometric data such as thumbprints and facial recognition, but these datasets remain siloed. Integration, he argues, is essential if forensic tools are to meaningfully curb crime.

"The failure to operationalise a comprehensive forensic system erodes confidence in institutions responsible for safety and justice," Mr Batte says.

Mr Batte points to public perceptions that some gun-related crimes are orchestrated by elements within the State itself. He cites the arrests of UPDF officers, including Uganda's former Chief of Military Intelligence, Maj Gen James Birungi, (investigated over alleged links to bomb attacks in Kampala), and former senior police officer Nicholas Agasiwwe (being tried over the killing of prosecutor Joan Kagezi). Such cases reinforce suspicions that high-profile crimes may be politically-motivated or internally driven.

"At the same time, government resources appear disproportionately focused on suppressing political activities—mobilising large police and army deployments against public processions—while ordinary crimes receive less urgency. This imbalance deepens public disillusionment and weakens trust in the justice system," he says.

Some experts warn that while Uganda has made progress in certain aspects of policing, the adoption of advanced forensic technologies remains limited. This gap, they argue, not only undermines investigations but may also embolden criminal networks that perceive a reduced likelihood of detection.

Mr Timothy Chemonges, a lawyer and human rights defender, notes that the delay highlights a serious gap between government commitments and actual

delivery. "It raises questions around prioritisation and accountability, especially on something as sensitive as gun crime. You cannot make such a major security promise and then go quiet on it for years—it creates doubt about how serious the follow-through really is."

Mr Chemonges further urges the government to be more deliberate in its approach: set clear timelines, provide regular public updates, and allow Parliament to actively track progress. He adds that independent monitoring is essential so that accountability does not rest solely on government self-assessment.

Illicit small arms problem

Mr Rusoke Kitumba, the police spokesperson, was not readily available for a comment and had not reverted to *Weekend Monitor* by press time.

A police statement, however, released on April 15, 2019, by ACP Nanyaye Polly, the former deputy police publicist, while updating the country on gun fingerprinting exercise, said a joint security team was in the process of registering all guns in the country.

The team, she disclosed then, comprises Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), Uganda Police Force (UPF), Uganda Prison Service (UPS), Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), External Security Organisations (ESO), and Internal Security Organisations (ISO) working closely with relevant authorities.

"So far, the team has registered all guns in the hands of the Police Force, Prisons Service, private security and those privately licensed within the Kampala metropolitan Area. The team is concerned with capturing the data of each individual gun and matching this data with the holder. The team then forwards this data to the forensic experts for interpretation and storage using the Integrated Ballistics Identification Systems (IBIS)," ACP Nanyaye said.

So what happened?

Mr Felix Ocen, a security expert, says the continued silence has fuelled speculation about whether the plan was abandoned, delayed due to funding constraints, or deprioritised altogether.

If the government fingerprinted firearms, north of 90 percent of the guns, does this mean that the issue of illegal arms and their prevalence remains a monkey on its back? For Nam's family and friends, it would appear so, following his fatal shooting while outside his home in Kawanda, Nabweru Division, Wakiso District, on April 19. Friends of the deceased condemned remarks blaming him for being out late at night, calling them insensitive.