
SMALL ARMS USE AND PROLIFERATION: STRATEGIES FOR A GLOBAL DILEMMA

By Eric David Newsom



Small arms proliferation is a symptom of increased intrastate conflicts and is “a problem that is not amenable to simple or quick solution and will be with us for the long term,” says Newsom, Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs. “The United States and the international community must therefore address the root causes of intrastate conflict and, at the same time, try to stem the supply of these weapons and contain the devastation that they cause.”

While most arms control efforts focus on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and heavy conventional weapons, small arms and light weapons designed for military use are responsible for most of the killing and injuries, especially of civilians, in the increasing number of intrastate conflicts that have occurred since the end of the Cold War. These weapons include assault rifles, light and heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and individually portable mortars and missiles.

Small arms and light weapons claim hundreds of thousands of lives and displace millions every year, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa. Small arms were the only weapons used in 46 of the 49 regional conflicts that have occurred since 1990. Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, and the Great Lakes region in Africa provide dismaying evidence of the ease with which these weapons can be obtained in large quantities, and the horrific consequences that can ensue. Although Africa is the hardest hit by the problem, in Latin America, large parts of Asia, and the Balkans small arms have exacerbated and prolonged conflicts, undermined peace agreements and complicated peace-building efforts, as well as contributed to regional instability, facilitated crime, and ultimately hindered economic and political development.

Nobody knows how many of these weapons currently circulate worldwide. Estimates range up to 500 million. Small arms are difficult to count, partly because they are easy to conceal and transport, but also because they endure so long. Many of the arms found in Africa, for

example, date from World Wars I and II. Small arms also are cheap. In some parts of Africa, an AK-47 can be purchased for as little as six dollars, or traded for a chicken or goat. Because these weapons are easy to use, manufacture, transport, conceal, and maintain, just understanding the scope of the problem, let alone finding solutions, poses a great challenge.

Moreover, the sources of small arms are diverse. Many countries lack adequate export control systems and end-use restraints; even those with respectable systems of control must confront the determined efforts of corrupt officials and others who are willing to divert legally sold weapons to illegal ends. Smugglers and rogue suppliers also continue to have access to old stocks and supplies left over from civil and international wars. Excess production capacity of small arms and ammunition in the developed world and indigenous production in zones of conflict, particularly in Africa, also contribute to proliferation.

Governments all over the world are becoming increasingly aware of the scale of the small-arms problem and of the urgent need to develop policies to combat it. The United States has become a leader on the issue. Secretary of State Albright has delivered three speeches on small arms — in September and November of 1998, and most recently on July 13 to the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). U.S. initiatives include expanding the nation's own “best practices,” such as adopting model regulations on legal trade drafted by the Organization of American States (OAS), and working through other fora to encourage states to criminalize UN embargo

violations, institute strict end-use and arms-brokering controls, promote greater transparency by sharing information on transfers and violations, and curb re-transfers of weapons.

At the global level, various initiatives are under way. The subject of small arms has figured prominently on the agenda of the UN General Assembly for a number of years. This has led to, among other developments, the establishment of the Group of Governmental Experts on Small Arms. Its report to the 54th General Assembly will serve as input for an international conference on the "Illicit Trade of Arms in All Its Aspects," to be convened no later than 2001. This conference will be used to galvanize international attention, to draw up a plan for global action to address the problem, and to carry out other objectives.

The focus of U.S. policy is to achieve agreement by next year on a Protocol on Illicit Firearms and Ammunition Trafficking to the UN Transnational Organized Crime Convention. This protocol is modeled on the InterAmerican Convention Against the Illicit Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, and Other Related Materials initiated by the OAS. Seven OAS member states have ratified the convention (Mexico, Belize, Bahamas, Bolivia, El Salvador, Peru, and Ecuador), and all but four OAS members have signed it. In June 1998 the President transmitted the convention to the U.S. Senate for its advice and consent.

In addition to the OAS, many other regional and international organizations have raised the issue in some way. Valuable initiatives at the regional level include the moratorium by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on the importation, exportation, and manufacture of small arms and light weapons, and efforts by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Regional Forum (ARF), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). These efforts include building enforcement and legal capacities, providing training on export control and customs, discouraging irresponsible exports, and enhancing stockpile security.

The European Union has developed a Code of Conduct on arms transfers, a Program for Preventing and Combating Illicit Trafficking in Conventional Arms, and a Joint Action on Small Arms. The Group of Eight and the Wassenaar Arrangement also are addressing aspects of the issue. In particular, the United States is working within the context of Wassenaar to complete an agreement by the year 2000 to control shoulder-fired missiles.

The United States also is keenly interested in promoting the destruction of excess stocks of weapons, especially in areas of conflict and post-conflict. In many countries, stocks are often stolen for use by indigenous criminal gangs, paramilitaries, or insurgents, or sold off for use in zones of conflict. Measures to secure active stocks and destroy excess weapons are cheap, often costing pennies a weapon for large stocks, and would result in great dividends by decreasing crime and insecurity, reducing the threat to development, and permitting the reconstruction of societies attempting to recover from civil war and ethnic conflict. Given the huge quantities of these weapons, until these stocks are reduced, our attempts to control international transfers will produce little benefit in those areas where civilians are suffering the most from the adverse impact of the weapons.

In a larger sense, small arms proliferation is one of many symptoms of increased intrastate conflicts since the end of the Cold War. The proliferation and use of these weapons in such conflicts is a problem that is not amenable to simple or quick solution, and it will be with us for the long term. The United States and the international community must therefore address the root causes of intrastate conflict and, at the same time, try to stem the supply of these weapons and contain the devastation that they cause. This will require us to begin to integrate small arms concerns into the fabric of our diplomatic relations, as we now do with democracy and human rights. Without sustained, creative attention to both aspects of the problem of intrastate conflict, many of the other problems that we strive to mitigate will become worse. ©