

# Small Arms and Natural Resources

**The illegal sale of natural resources facilitates arms trafficking because:**

- **Small arms can be traded directly for commodities or for the profits generated by commodity sales**
- **The same pipelines used to smuggle commodities are used to carry out illegal arms deals**
- **Resource profits have enabled rebel groups, terrorist organisations and government forces to stay well armed**

Small arms trafficking, resource wars, and the illegal trade in commodities are interconnected. The income generated by exploiting petroleum, timber, drugs, diamonds and other minerals such as Coltan (used in cellular phones and other electronic equipment) engenders corruption and deadly conflicts across the globe. During the 1990s, more than 5 million people were killed due to resource conflicts, and as many as 20 million were displaced from their homes. Small arms are the weapons of choice for both government and rebel forces in resource wars because they are inexpensive, easy to hide, widely accessible and can be traded directly for commodities or for the profits generated by commodity sales. Both the licit and illicit sale of these resources have not only triggered and financed interstate and intrastate conflicts, but also contributed to arms trafficking, humanitarian and environmental disasters, and severe human rights violations.

Arms are smuggled through a complex network that goes hand in hand with the illicit trade of commodities. Diamond trafficking is a particularly intricate system of trade that extends from the government palaces in Liberia, Togo and Burkina Faso to the private arms smugglers in Bulgaria, Ukraine and Russia and the diamond dealers in Antwerp and Tel Aviv. Diamonds are an especially popular commodity to trade for weapons on the black market because they are very easy to hide, difficult to trace and highly profitable.

Many rebel groups and terrorist organizations use resource profits to fund their operations. Between 1999 and 2001, al Qaeda reaped millions of dollars from the illicit sale of diamonds mined by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone. Throughout the 1990s the RUF mined some \$US 25–125 million worth of diamonds each year, of which only \$US 1 million is estimated to be legal. The money generated by legal and illegal transfers of such resources not only has enabled rebel groups, terrorists and government forces to stay well armed, but also has profited international companies and lined the pockets of an elite minority, while the rest of the population remains impoverished. Moreover, high economic dependence on the trade in natural resources may result in underdevelopment of other crucial sectors of the society, such as health and education, making certain resource-rich countries more prone to a humanitarian crisis.

*\* Small arms are weapons that can be carried and used by one or two people, including handguns, assault rifles, machine guns, grenade launchers, anti-tank or anti-aircraft guns and light mortars. Light weapons, ammunition, grenades, landmines, and explosives are also part of this category.*