

Small Arms and Private Trafficking

Private traffickers of small arms have flourished because:

- **Small arms are in high demand among abusive governments, militias and criminals**
- **Small arms are easy to transport and conceal**
- **Small arms controls are generally weak and seldom enforced**

During the Cold War, rival governments recruited private traffickers to carry out covert arms deals. The pipelines traffickers activated then remain operational today, with operators continuing to use them for their own purposes or on behalf of governments and official agents. These same pipelines are also employed to transfer drugs, endangered animal species and products, precious minerals, and other valuable commodities.

Arms trafficking networks involve the cooperation of a number of actors, often scattered in several countries. Pilots based in Belgium or South Africa, for example, have been known to pick up weapons from the Commonwealth of Independent States in Eastern Europe and deliver them to clients stretching from Africa to Afghanistan. These operators, known as brokers, will even conceal weapons in relief cargo they were hired to carry on behalf of humanitarian agencies.

Private arms traffickers are motivated primarily by profit and are indifferent to the human rights records of their clients. They are skilled in using counterfeited or fraudulent documents, finding clandestine transport means and routes, and ingratiating themselves with corrupt officials.

Private arms traffickers are elusive by definition, and their tracks often run underground. They are able to avoid attention and escape punishment either by successfully circumventing national arms controls and international arms embargoes, or by getting official protection. But they are not beyond scrutiny. The role of these traffickers in the supply of small arms to conflict zones around the world has been documented by the UN, parliamentary commissions of inquiry, the press, and civil society.

Traditionally, however, illegal traffickers have carried on with their business in a climate of impunity because of a lack of government oversight, or political will to arrest illicit arms operators and break up arms trafficking networks.