

Small Arms and Human Rights

Small arms often lead to human rights abuses because:

- **Small arms can empower abusive forces to repress individual and group rights**
- **Small arms transfers to abusive government and irregular forces often go unchecked**
- **Small arms are often used against civilians in internal conflicts**

Small arms are employed in a wide variety of human rights abuses, including extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, and torture. Small arms have also been used to kill, maim, rape, and forcibly displace people in conflicts spanning from Afghanistan to the former Yugoslavia to Sudan. The victims of such abuses have been predominantly civilians, who were targeted in sustained and indiscriminate attacks.

Both government and irregular forces are guilty of using small arms in human rights abuses. Government responsibility for human rights abuses can be grouped into three categories: commission, omission, or neglect. Commission means using arms to persecute individuals or execute them outside of the rule of law. It is also characterized by the presence of a direct government hand in the provision of arms to other abusive states, at times in defiance of international arms embargoes. Omission pertains to turning a blind eye toward the abusive use of weapons by paramilitaries or other proxy groups. It also means allowing private

traffickers to transfer weapons to further a government's political or commercial interest. Neglect encompasses a failure to implement or enforce arms controls or to prevent one's territory from being used as a transshipment point for weapons. Non-state actors are also implicated in the abusive use of small arms. Indeed, their military strategy often involves terrorizing and killing suspected opponents with no regard for international norms of human rights.

Abusive forces, non-governmental militia, arms-supplying governments, as well as private traffickers have seldom been held accountable and punished for the role they have played in the escalation of conflict and human rights abuses. Such impunity, together with a failure to disarm former combatants and destroy their weapons, has put civilians at risk even after the termination of conflicts. Government actions that put civilians at high risk of crime and violence in post-conflict areas and elsewhere violate the most essential human right: the right to life and security of person.