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Few security threats are more ubiquitous, intractable, and pernicious than the illicit proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons. They are the weapons of choice for most terrorists, criminals, and insurgents who use them to devastating effect against civilians and soldiers alike. The Geneva-based Small Arms Survey estimates that these weapons are responsible for roughly sixty to ninety percent of direct conflict deaths, which numbered between 80,000 and 108,000 in 2003 alone,<sup>1</sup> and tens of thousands of additional deaths outside of war zones. Some countries suffer disproportionately from this scourge. In war-torn Colombia, for example, small arms-related violence has claimed the lives of nearly a half million people since 1979.<sup>2</sup>

Even the fighting forces of the most powerful nations in the world are vulnerable to modern small arms. In Lebanon, the terrorist group Hezbollah shocked the world when it used laser-guided anti-tank weapons, assault rifles and other small arms to bring Israel's August ground offensive to a grinding halt – a feat unmatched by the armies of the Arab world. Similarly, coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan – the best armed and best trained soldiers in the world – regularly suffer casualties at the hands of insurgents armed only with small arms, light weapons, and improvised explosive devices.

The sources, methods, and routes through which Hezbollah and other bad actors acquire small arms and light weapons are remarkably diverse. At one end of the spectrum are the massive, sanctions-busting arms shipments organized by international traffickers like the infamous Victor Bout. Bout and his competitors acquire large quantities of military weapons from corrupt or negligent governments and deliver them to war zones and embargoed regimes through a complex and fluid network of front companies.

While Bout's shipments grab headlines, most illicit weapons are acquired in less dramatic fashion. Some are illegally purchased or stolen from private owners or pilfered, a few at a time, from poorly secured police and military arsenals. Others are seized by guerrillas from government forces or peace-keepers, or looted from overrun

army garrisons. Craft production – small scale, clandestine production of firearms by unlicensed gunsmiths – is another source of illicit weapons.

Reining in this deadly scourge requires sustained, simultaneous, and coordinated action on many different fronts. No panacea and no single country, regardless of the influence it wields or resources at its disposal, can tackle this problem alone. What is needed is a systematic, multifaceted global approach aimed at:

- recovering illicit weapons already in circulation through buyback programs and demobilization, disarmament and reintegration programs;
- preventing the theft, loss and diversion of additional weapons by controlling exports, securing stockpiles, and destroying surplus weapons;
- disrupting or dismantling arms trafficking networks through undercover "sting" operations and tracing seized weapons to their sources; and
- addressing the root causes of the conditions that create demand for illicit weaponry.

While individual governments have been battling small arms traffickers for decades, it wasn't until the mid-1990s that the international community took up the issue. In 1995, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for a group of government experts to study the nature, causes, and means of addressing the small arms threat. The group's report fleshed out the problem of "excessive and destabilizing" accumulation of, and illicit trafficking in, small arms and light weapons, and called for inter alia, the convening of an international conference on the illicit arms trade. That Conference, held in 2001 in New York, drew worldwide attention to the problem and provided a road map for addressing it in the form of a *Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects*.

Since then there has been a flurry of national, regional, and international initiatives aimed at addressing all aspects of the small arms threat. These initiatives vary significantly in rigor and scope, but all contribute – however minimally – to the nascent, global campaign to rein in the illicit trade and misuse of small arms.

Have they made a difference? The absence of good data precludes a definitive answer to this question. At best, existing data provides a

<sup>1</sup> Small Arms Survey 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Small Arms Survey 2006.

# to Stem the Trade of Illicit Small Arms

snapshot of trafficking activity in a given country or region at a given time. Another, albeit less telling, indicator of progress is the implementation of control strategies, including those laid out in the UN *Programme of Action*. A study on *Programme* implementation done by International Alert, Saferworld, and the University of Bradford in 2006 reveals progress in some areas and regrettable inaction in others. An example of relatively significant progress is in the designation of national points of contact on small arms issues, which facilitates inter-governmental cooperation and information-sharing. As of May 2006,

150 countries had designated national points of contact, up from 111 three years earlier. Similarly, great strides have been made in curbing the threat from particularly dangerous weapons, such as man-portable air defense systems. Since 2001, US-led efforts have yielded agreements on MANPADS controls in five international fora and the destruction of at least 21,000 surplus and poorly secured missiles.

Progress in other areas has been woefully inadequate. Many states lack even the most basic of safeguards, such as systematic

stockpile management and brokering laws. According to the 2006 study, only about 102 countries have “standards and procedures for the management and security of stockpiles” and only 37 countries have “specific controls over SALW brokering activities.” While a lack of political will explains many of these failings, resource limitations also play a role. Systematically monitoring imports and exports and securing borders requires infrastructure, personnel and equipment, funding for which is often in short supply in developing countries. **FAS**

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