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What characterises the small arms trade in Africa? For many it is the image of Antonov transport planes depositing their cargoes in failed states such as Liberia and Angola. The general view of this illicit trade is one of a complex network of corrupt officials, unscrupulous arms merchants, international brokers, and transport agents — all conspiring to supply the dictators and warlords of the continent.

This image informed the emerging small arms control movement that began to take shape during the epidemic of African conflicts in the 1990s. Since then, the bulk of international attention has focused on major international illicit trade. Such large-scale illicit shipments to Africa continue to this day, but they have subsided, just as many of the wars that attracted them have dissipated. These major arms and ammunition shipments were and are a symptom of Africa's full-scale conflicts, but they are not the only cause of the simmering potential for war in many African states.

The wars that ushered in the ubiquity of the Kalashnikov have, in many states, subsided into a post-conflict disquiet—an uneasiness that cannot truly be described as peace. Violence characterises these settings, although rarely is it organised or intense enough to attract large-scale, illicit arms shipments. But arms are still entering the equation and in large numbers. The “Antonov phenomenon”, with its emphasis on bulk transfer, masks an uncounted number

Where Have All the Antonovs Gone?

of low-volume transfers that, every year, contribute to the destabilization of communities, the frailty of states, and the escalation of grievances into full-blown civil conflict.

This short essay focuses on the role played by low-level small arms proliferation in fuelling the demand for arms — a self-sustaining dynamic that links local

insecurity, the illicit trade in small arms and the legal state-to-state trade in weaponry. In particular it highlights the illegal flow of weapons from state armed forces to non-state actors in the region.

The trade in question has been called the “ant trade” — a slow, piece-by-piece movement of small arms across the continent. But this term implies something localized, something unimpressive in scale and with few links to the international arms trade. To view it as such is a mistake and one that is often made. To consider it peripheral to the “real” illicit trade is to denigrate its effect on security, its impact on development, and on the socio-political trajectory of the continent as a whole.

Where does this trade originate? It is partly a product of the vast accumulation of arms during Africa's shattering Cold War conflicts — a symptom of societies that have become militarized and armed to the point of saturation, but it is more than that.

Africa's illicit stocks of small arms are being fed, continually, by a burgeoning trade in newly-manufactured arms and ammunition. These weapons are produced by some of the largest supplier states in the legal arms trade.

The new arms circulate widely among post-conflict societies. They propagate among communities that have escaped full-scale conflict, but seek to defend themselves from more general threats. They proliferate also among criminals — the “spoilers” to peace, whose predatory activities hold many communities in a permanent state of insecurity.

These weapons are not shipped into countries by internationally-savvy illicit arms dealers. More often than not, they are lost from the military arsenals of African states through a trinity of factors — poor government policy, poverty and insecurity.

Throughout the continent, ethnic rivalry, the encroachment of nomadic peoples, or the threat from high levels of criminality, prompt governments to distribute arms, create armed



The Illicit Small Arms Trade in Africa

militia groups, and deploy troops. In this muscular and often uncoordinated approach to security, state armed forces often prove to be the interface between the legal and illicit arms markets — exacerbating small arms proliferation and violence in the region.

A powerful mix of poverty and insecurity is at the root of this flow of arms. Soldiers and government militias are paid erratically and poorly. Minimal oversight makes arms and ammunition an attractive currency in the absence of a regular income. Many communities suffer violence and insecurity, often at the hands of state-supported “security providers”, but communities seeking security also trade goods for arms with these forces; perpetuating insecurity in their communities and further increasing the demand for small arms.

The flow of illicit arms and ammunition is commensurate with the degree to which governments distribute arms, form militias, or deploy troops for civilian duties. It is not uncommon to find military ammunition, produced as recently as 2004, in the hands of communities living far from central government. In the African context, this ammunition is new. Within only two years, it has been legally transferred from a manufacturer to a state party, sold by state armed forces deployed in a distant locality, and become fuel for another of Africa’s inter-communal conflicts.

Today’s illicit trade is facilitated by the near monopoly of Kalashnikov-pattern weapons in Africa. Such a monopoly ensures interoperability of parts, and most importantly ammunition. The result is that weapons and ammunition can be traded between virtually any armed actor on the continent, irrespective of whether he or she is a member of the army, a rebel, or a criminal. Wherever state armed forces are deployed or militias created, their weapons and ammunition are indistinguishable from those in the hands of civilians.

Small, personally-motivated trades of illicit arms and ammunition will never appear as dramatic as an Antonov shipment, but they occur tens of thousands of times each year. Every round of ammunition or weapon supplied has the potential to spark or escalate armed violence.

It is not uncommon for rebellions and large-scale insurgencies to have been started by groups with only five or ten assault rifles to their name. These are the groups that, if unchecked and unhindered in their access to arms, can eventually become the recipients of the kinds of large-scale illicit shipments that characterised the wars of the 1990s.

Few of these weapons are produced in Africa. They are manufactured by the foreign powers that supply African governments. These powers do so legally, never contravening an arms embargo and never breaking with international convention.

China, for instance, has become the predominant supplier of small arms and ammunition to a number of countries in East Africa. China’s trade is legal. But Chinese arms and ammunition appears in illicit markets almost immediately after transfer to a state party in the region. The question of whether supplier states are exercising due diligence is an obvious one—supplying arms to some of Africa’s states is analogous to pouring water into a sieve.

State-sanctioned arms transfers to countries in Africa are fuelling the continent’s insecurity and impeding its development. Governments in the region recognize this, but point fingers at their neighbours, at porous borders, and at the global north for producing these arms. Their



focus is squarely on the international illicit trade in small arms. Rarely do they concede that much of the problem stems from their own security forces selling arms and ammunition.

States complain that sealing state borders is an insurmountable problem, given the paucity of funds available to most governments in the region. But cheaper remedies may be far more effective. Policies of creating militia units or distributing arms in society can be reversed and, given minimal investment and political will, improving oversight and accountability over state small arms stocks is an attainable goal.

In some ways, the international movement to control small arms has overlooked the extent of small arms loss from state forces. Researchers and policy makers perpetuate a false dichotomy by discriminating between the legal and illicit markets. A focus on the latter draws attention away from the near seamless convergence of the two markets in Africa.

The Antonov phenomenon is not dead; it has subsided sufficiently to draw attention to the underlying sources of small arms in the region. The loss of small arms from state stocks may not yet have the media profile to grab significant international attention.

It nevertheless facilitates predation, allows crime to flourish, and undermines the confidence of communities recovering from armed conflict. These factors conspire to create a strong demand for small arms — a self-sustaining dynamic that keeps much of Africa simmering just below boiling point.

