

The Illicit Arms Trade in Africa

A GLOBAL ENTERPRISE

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IN AFRICA and elsewhere, the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons is opaque, amorphous and dynamic. It is also a global enterprise with illicit weapons across Africa coming from virtually every major arms producing country in the world. Small Arms Survey puts the dollar value of the illicit small arms trade at US\$1 billion, or 10-20% of the global trade. The clandestine nature of this trade makes it impossible to confirm these estimates, but what is obvious is that in Africa the illicit trade in small arms is counter-developmental on many levels. What follows is a snapshot of the sources, the trade, the costs and what must be done.

SOURCES

ONLY A HANDFUL of African countries have the capacity to manufacture arms and ammunition with South Africa topping the list. The small arms component of the South African industry comprises less than ten manufacturers and their output is insignificant in terms of the global small arms trade. Further, because national governments tightly monitor and regulate African manufacturers, very limited numbers of African-manufactured arms and ammunition enter the illegal market.

Instead, small arms are seized or stolen from government forces, looted from state armouries, purchased from corrupt soldiers and stolen from private owners. Similarly, peacekeepers are occasionally relieved of (or voluntarily part with) their small arms, which often end up in rebel arsenals. The ambush of Guinean peacekeepers in January 2000, for example, netted Sierra Leonean rebels more than 550 weapons, including assault rifles, machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades and two tons of ammunition.

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Rebels and other armed groups are another major source of illicit small arms. According to UN investigators, Somali militias regularly buy arms from and sell arms to each other on the local black market.

Finally, the unauthorised craft production of firearms by local gunsmiths is a significant source of illicit small arms in some areas. A recent study of craft production in Ghana by Emmanuel Kwesi

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Aning found that the country's unlicensed gunsmiths have the collective capacity to produce up to 200,000 firearms a year, some of which are reportedly "of a quality comparable with industrially produced guns".

Governments and armed groups in neighbouring states are also significant sources of illicit small arms. Many civil conflicts in Africa quickly transform into regional wars as neighbouring governments provide material support to one or more of the parties to the conflict. This support often includes large numbers of small arms, many of which are transferred illicitly. Since 2000, UN

investigators have documented weapons transfers by neighbouring governments to armed groups in Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Sudan, all of which were under UN arms embargoes at the time of the transfers.

Cross-border arms trafficking by members of armed groups is also common. *Small Arms Survey* claims that Liberian rebels have reportedly crossed the poorly secured Ivorian border to trade their weapons for motorcycles. Similarly, anecdotal evidence suggests that members of *Forces Nouvelles*, an Ivorian rebel group, have smuggled weapons into Mali and Ghana, trading them for food and other consumer goods.

Arms traffickers on other continents also fly or ship weapons illicitly into Africa. In fact, according to researchers Wood and Peleman, most of the illicit small arms used in Africa originate from China, Israel, and more than 20 OSCE (Organisation

for Security and Co-operation in Europe) members. They are either the remnants of large-scale weapons shipments to rebel movements during the Cold War, or are recent supplies from the massive, sanctions-busting shipments organised by the so-called "merchants of death" — the globe-trotting arms brokers who specialise in the clandestine delivery of weapons to war zones and dictators. Representative of these transfers is a 68-ton shipment that was flown into Burkina Faso in March 1999 and later shipped to Liberia and Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF). UN investigators, who summarised their findings in a July 2000 report, reviewed the shipment and found 715 boxes containing 3000 assault rifles, 25 rocket-propelled grenades, 50 machine guns, and several guided anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles.

TRAFFICKING METHODS AND ROUTES

AS SMALL arms are lightweight, concealable and durable, the ways in which they can be smuggled are nearly limitless. Long, porous and poorly patrolled land borders facilitate the illicit transfer of small arms on foot or by truck. Some of this trafficking is large-scale and systematic. UN experts investigating arms embargo violations in Somalia documented the delivery of arms to Somali militias by Ethiopian truck convoys. Similarly, Liberia's Charles Taylor transported many of the weapons he provided to the RUF across the border in trucks. Rogue soldiers, rebels, refugees and others also walk across borders with one or two small arms at a time.

Traffickers also smuggle small arms along Africa's rivers and coasts. Researchers from the Small Arms Survey claim that Malian arms smugglers pack small arms into waterproof sacks, attach them to the bottom of boats, and run them up the Niger River. In the Horn, the smugglers that ply the Gulf of Aden often use dhows — large, wooden-hulled vessels with distinctive triangular sails — to deliver large quantities of small arms from Yemen to Somali warlords. In August 2001, the dhow *Alshadax* reportedly delivered nearly 500 assault rifles, grenade launchers and machine guns to a Somali faction leader, according to UN investigators.

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Aircraft are used to ferry weapons inter-continentially and regionally. Military cargo planes often play important roles in the large, inter-continental illicit transfers arranged by international brokers. These transfers are often dizzyingly complex, consisting of front companies, false paperwork, and a loose collection of brokers, financiers and corrupt officials operating out of several different countries. A good example is the July 2000 shipment of Ukrainian small arms ammunition to the Ivory Coast, which was investigated by a UN panel of experts. Initially, the shipment of five million 7.62mm cartridges appeared legitimate. The broker, a Moscow-

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based company named Aviatrend, provided the Ukrainian government with a signed and authenticated Ivorian End-User Certificate and allowed a Ukrainian military officer to fly with ammunition to Abidjan to make sure it was not diverted en route. As planned, the plane arrived in the Ivory Coast on July 15 and its contents were unloaded.

Shortly thereafter, however, boxes of the ammunition were loaded onto a plane owned by a company that UN officials claim was "set up for...smuggling operations only" and flown to Liberia, where it was delivered to Charles Taylor's embargoed regime. The deal, which was partially organised by the Ukrainian arms dealer Leonid Minin, was apparently one of several illicit arms transfers scheduled for that summer. Minin's plans fell apart when he was arrested in Italy on drug and prostitution charges. In his hotel room, Italian police reportedly found forged copies of the original (authentic) Ivorian End-User Certificate, documents linking Minin to the Ukrainian ammunition deal and the Aviatrend representative who had helped arrange it, and plans for additional illicit arms transfers to Liberia.

COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES

THE SMALL ARMS SURVEY estimates that small arms have resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of injuries each year. They are further responsible for 60 to 90% of total conflict deaths. However, the exact global total is unknown as data is

particularly sketchy in those countries that are in the throes of violent conflict. In the few African countries where reliable data is available, small arms are a leading cause of unnatural deaths. For example, in South Africa, small arms are the principal cause of unnatural deaths (close to 30% of the total) more than road accident fatalities.

The availability of small arms combined with the experience of protracted armed conflict has resulted in the emergence of a "gun culture" in certain African countries. It entails a socio-legal system of norms and values where gun ownership is highly valued and is linked to identity and status. In some societies, gun culture may even result in the perception of armed violence (or the threat thereof) as an acceptable and legitimate means of social interaction between people. This is particularly the case in areas where the state is weak, or absent, such as the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Somalia.

Illicit small arms have also led to the violent intensification of inter-community tensions and conflicts over scarce resources. For instance, low-scale cattle rustling has been a feature of rural life in eastern Africa for centuries, particularly in the border areas of Kenya and Uganda. However, approximately 20 years ago cattle rustlers began to acquire small arms illicitly. The nature of the conflict has changed because of the availability of small arms. Hundreds of people have been killed and numerous communities displaced, with the Karamojong and the Pokot nomadic cattle herders believed to be the principal perpetrators. In April 2003, 2,000 Pokot cattle rustlers from Kenya killed 28 people and displaced thousands in eastern Uganda in a raid using illicit firearms.

Small arms have also been used to engage in poaching activities in poverty-stricken areas near wildlife parks and sanctuaries. For example, nature conservationists estimate that between 1977 and 1997 the elephant population in Africa halved in size, largely due to poaching. According to the United Kingdom Parliamentary Office on Science and Technology, the combination of the lucrative "bushmeat" trade — which supplies the meat of wild animals — and ineffective governance in many central African areas, has encouraged the formation of well-armed paramilitary poaching groups whose actions have decimated endangered wildlife populations. In the Congo basin, between one million and three

million tons of bushmeat is harvested each year. This in turn has resulted in a downturn for the tourism economies of these areas.

The proliferation and misuse of small arms is also counter-developmental. According to the 2005 Human Development Report: "Insecurity linked to armed conflict remains one of the greatest obstacles to human development. It is both a cause and a consequence of mass poverty". The human development index reflects this. Of the 20 countries listed as experiencing the lowest levels of human development (all of which are in Africa) more than 50% have been subject to significant levels of armed violence since 1990.

In the majority of these countries, illicit small arms were responsible for injuries and death. That is, the lethality and ready availability of illicit small arms in situations of violent conflict extends beyond the injury, death and psychological trauma of individual victims; it also decimates economies and dislocates societies. The reason for this is that armed conflict seriously disrupts or even destroys food production and distribution processes, with hunger and malnutrition being the direct result, especially among the most vulnerable population groups. For example, the civil war in the DRC has resulted in approximately four million deaths — an estimated 7% of the total population — that are not the direct result of small arms violence, but instead can be attributed to malnutrition and disease.

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In Sudan, approximately two million people have died and six million have been internally displaced because of the protracted armed conflict — fought primarily with illicit small arms.

The availability and proliferation of small arms in contexts of violent conflict hinder the ability of development agencies to provide aid and food relief and for governments to provide security, enforce the law and repair damaged or destroyed infrastructure. A recent survey of humanitarian relief agencies by Small Arms Survey and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue revealed that these organisations were unable to access a quarter of their target population groups due to the perceived availability of small arms.

CONTROL STRATEGIES

MYRIAD SMALL arms control and disarmament strategies have been implemented in Africa at the national, sub-regional and regional levels. These control measures have generally been guided by a combination of international and regional small arms agreements. The most prominent have been the Bamako Declaration (2000), which represents a common African position on the trafficking and proliferation of illicit small arms, and the UN Programme of Action (UNPoA) on illicit use, trade and proliferation of small arms (2001).

Arms control agreements have also been negotiated at the sub-regional level, usually through Regional Economic Communities, such as the Southern African Development Community. These agreements have sought to, among other objectives: make illicit small arms production and possession a criminal offence, destroy stocks of surplus weapons and introduce tighter stockpile and arms transfer control measures.

An innovative feature of both the Bamako Declaration and the UNPoA has been the recommendation that states establish national focal points (NFPs), which are coordination bodies responsible for devising a national arms control action plan, as well as facilitating small arms control research, monitoring, and the formulation of policy and legislation. Many African states have created NFPs. Some of these entities have been active in promoting and enabling small arms controls, such as in Botswana, Kenya, Namibia and Rwanda, while others are mere virtual entities, as is the case with many countries in central Africa and the Horn. Yet, many African governments have struggled to have a meaningful impact on illegal transfers as they lack the capacity to police their borders and points of entry effectively, as well as secure state weapons stockpiles. Additionally, there is no body at the continental level that regulates the arms trade in Africa.

Arms collection and destruction has been a popular strategy for reducing the quantity of illicit small arms in Africa. Countries like Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Uganda (to name a few) have destroyed large quantities of small arms and ammunition that were surplus, obsolete or confiscated by security forces. For example, the various

components of Operation Rachel, a joint-weapons destruction initiative between the Mozambican and South African police has so far resulted in more than 20,000 small arms and several million rounds of ammunition being destroyed. In certain countries, voluntary weapons collection programmes have been established, which usually include an incentive component for people to surrender small arms, such as cash or farming implements. However, the success of these programmes has been limited, as in many cases mainly old and unserviceable small arms were surrendered.

A number of African countries have been subject to arms embargoes, which are instruments of coercive diplomacy that seek to prevent the transfer of arms and military-related material to a specific

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state or armed group, deemed to pose a threat to international peace and security. There are four types of arms embargoes: mandatory UN embargoes, voluntary UN embargoes, embargoes imposed by international organisations, and embargoes implemented by collections of states. The most effective have been the mandatory UN embargoes, as states are required by a UN Security Council Resolution to take appropriate measures to implement the arms embargo. Where there have been allegations of systematic

violations, the Security Council has established independent panels of experts to investigate the violations and make recommendations on how to strengthen the embargo.

Over the past 15 years, there has been an increase in the use of mandatory UN arms embargoes. Since the beginning of 1992, more than 15 such initiatives have been imposed against African states and/or rebel groups, while between 1945 and 1992, there were only five UN arms embargoes that targeted African countries. It is difficult to ascertain their effectiveness, as numerous other factors can contribute to the reduction in weapons transfers.

In practice, greed and national interest have contributed to violations of arms embargoes by states and arms brokers. For example, Rwanda and Uganda were implicated in violating the

embargo against DRC, while Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti were alleged to have circumvented the embargo against Somalia. The UN Security Council has been loath to take punitive action against those member states that have been consistently implicated in embargo-busting activities. However, some member states and the European Union have taken action against these brokers by grounding their aircraft, adding their names to national watch lists and even making arrests.

THE WAY AHEAD

THE REGIONAL and international agreements identified above provide a road map for reducing the illicit small arms trade, both in Africa and globally. Implementing these agreements requires significant and sustained political will and a steady infusion of resources. While the responsibility for implementation lies primarily with African governments, the international community must do its part. Below are four action items that, if fully implemented, would help to reduce the illicit small arms trade in Africa:

- 1) *Expand foreign aid programmes that target the illicit arms trade.* Over the past five years, several international organisations and individual countries have established aid programmes that fund the destruction of surplus or obsolete small arms and improve the security of small arms storage facilities. These programmes have eliminated millions of surplus weapons from dozens of leaky stockpiles in places like the Ukraine, Serbia and Romania — all sources of illicit arms transfers to Africa. Yet despite their obvious importance, many of these programmes continue to subsist on shoestring budgets. These programmes should be expanded. Similarly, more funding should be allocated for programmes that help African governments acquire the vehicles, equipment and training they need to better control their seaports, airspace and land borders. Donor states should work with recipients to ensure that they have the capacity to use and maintain the equipment properly, preferably with minimal outside support.
- 2) *Crack down on violations of UN arms embargoes.* Too often, governments fail to respond decisively to violation of UN arms embargoes. This failure takes many forms, including the continuation of arms sales to sanctions-

busting regimes and the tolerance of front companies set up by arms traffickers. The international community needs to address these shortcomings by cutting off arms transfers to regimes that repeatedly violate UN arms embargoes and by aggressively investigating and dismantling the networks of front companies run by Africa's "merchants of death".

- 3) *Strengthen national arms control legislation.* Regional and international arms control agreements are limited in that it is the prerogative of African governments to implement the provisions of these agreements by amending or establishing relevant legislation and policy. Even if legislation and policy are in place, the necessary resources and systems, such as small arms registers and licence-vetting procedures, are often dysfunctional or absent. Hence, sub-regional organisations and the international community should support the establishment and effective implementation of national arms control legislation through the provision of resources and technical expertise.
- 4) *Address the factors that fuel the illicit small arms economy.* The illicit small arms market in Africa flourishes due to a combination of underdevelopment, insecurity, inequality and ineffective governance. As result, destroying small arms, reinforcing arms embargoes and bolstering national arms controls will not have a decisive effect on the illicit small arms economy unless the root causes of violence and conflict are comprehensively addressed. This is typically a long term and multi-dimensional process.