

“The small arms trade—both legal and illicit—is having continuing negative consequences in both conflict and post-conflict zones. . . .”

## Sub-Saharan Small Arms: The Damage Continues

RACHEL STOHL AND RHEA MYERSCOUGH

On April 1, 2007, five African Union peacekeepers were killed in a gunfight in Sudan's Darfur province, near the border with Chad. It was the deadliest attack on the undermanned peacekeeping force since it was deployed three years ago to monitor a shaky cease-fire agreement between rebel groups and the central government. Small arms violence has become a regular occurrence in Darfur since the government in 2003 began using Arab tribal militias to wage a brutal counterinsurgency campaign. More than 2.5 million people have been forced to flee their homes for refugee camps protected by the peacekeepers, only to find they offer no relief from armed violence.

Unfortunately, Sudan is not the only African country to suffer the consequences of small arms and light weapons proliferation. The majority of the armed conflicts that have taken place on the continent (with the notable exception of the 1998–2000 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea) have been fought primarily with small arms and light weapons. Today, all regions of the continent are in various phases of rebuilding in the aftermath of these conflicts, and this rebuilding has been complicated by the legacy of these weapons.

The small arms trade—both legal and illicit—is having continuing negative consequences in both conflict and post-conflict zones throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Fortunately, potential remedies are available at the national, regional, and global levels to counter small arms proliferation and misuse.

### GUNS FOR SALE

News reports and government statements often give the misleading impression that Africa is a con-

tinental awash in small arms and light weapons. To the contrary, researchers for the Small Arms Survey, based at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, estimate that approximately 30 million firearms are circulating across Africa. That is considerably less than the total number of small arms in Europe, estimated at 84 million.

The total number of weapons, however, is less significant than how the weapons are used and how their numbers grow. Thirty million small arms in Africa have been more destabilizing than the more than 200 million circulating in the United States—a result of the poor national controls on arms transfers in Africa, continued armed conflict, political instability, lack of economic opportunities, and deadly cycles of violence, among other hazardous conditions.

The Small Arms Survey reports that at least 38 companies are producing small arms in sub-Saharan Africa. But indigenous companies are not filling the demand for weapons. South Africa is the largest and only globally significant arms exporter in the region, but most of the \$6 million in small arms it exported in 2005 went to countries outside of Africa. The continent imported at least \$25 million worth of small arms and light weapons in 2005 from a number of legal sources. Arms also flow into Africa through illicit sales. Regardless of the source, influxes of small arms have increased both the length and the lethality of armed conflicts across Africa.

Because of a lack of transparency in the international small arms trade, it is impossible to quantify the value and identify the sources of all legal small arms exports to Africa. Instead, snapshots of this lethal trade must be garnered from media accounts, United Nations reports, and field research. France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States are known exporters to Africa, though many of these countries claim

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their weapons exports are intended to help recipient nations maintain stability, not to fuel conflicts. China and Russia are also known to send weapons to African governments and armed groups, though the extent of their trade with Africa is even less well known, because of scarce documentation and an absence of government transparency.

In many cases, weapons have been illegally retransferred from countries at the conclusion of conflicts, traveling to incite or reignite additional conflicts in neighboring countries and regions. West Africa is a particularly poignant example of this trend. The same weapons, and often the same fighters, moved from conflict to conflict over the course of the past decade and a half, starting in Liberia, moving to Sierra Leone, then to Ivory Coast, and then to Guinea.

However, this recycling of weapons occurs in other regions as well. Weapons from neighboring Chad have found their way into the Darfur region of Sudan. In Somalia, the recently deposed Union of Islamic Courts reportedly received arms from Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, and Libya, while the interim government is believed to have acquired weapons from Ethiopia, Uganda, and Yemen.

Craft production—the small-scale, manual production of crude weapons—has also proved a fruitful source of illicit weaponry. Arms analysts Matt Schroeder and Guy Lamb report that in Ghana, for example, craft production has the potential to yield up to 200,000 new weapons a year. These unregulated arms could be used for criminal violence within Ghana, or make their way to other regional conflict zones.

Experts believe that the vast majority of small arms in Africa—an estimated 79 percent—are in the hands of civilians, with only 19 percent in the hands of state militaries or police, and the remaining 2 percent in the hands of insurgents. The Small Arms Survey estimates that at least 1 million civilian-owned small arms are lost or stolen worldwide every year. These weapons can quickly and illegally flow between people and groups without oversight, fueling the black market and contributing to violence and crime. In South Africa, nearly 15,000 lost or stolen firearms each year contribute to illicit weapons availability.

UN arms embargoes have not been effective in preventing weapons from reaching conflict zones in Africa. Schroeder and Lamb count 15 arms embargoes imposed on African states and/or rebel groups since 1992, many of which have been ignored. UN experts have noted breaches in arms

embargoes imposed on Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan, among others. UN reports note that arms transfers to Sudan, and the Darfur region in particular, in violation of an international embargo, have allowed rebels to continue their fight against government forces. Growing evidence also reveals that China has supplied the government of Sudan with many deadly weapons in recent years, including items such as tanks as well as small arms.

Government complicity is often crucial to the violation of embargoes. The UN has found that countries that allow weapons to be shipped or smuggled through their borders are particularly responsible for such violations. A 2000 UN report on the Sierra Leone embargo found that Liberia and Burkina Faso, among other countries, actively contravened the embargoes in the region by allowing weapons to be shipped to and through their countries, knowingly and illicitly passing them on to the warring parties.

## DANGEROUS CONSEQUENCES

The proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons, both during and after armed conflicts, have a number of negative consequences on societies. Countries across Africa have experienced the full range of these direct and indirect impacts to varying degrees. The most obvious effect is that thousands of people—civilians and combatants alike—are killed or injured every year.

Because many small arms remain in circulation and in the hands of former combatants at the end of hostilities, they are often used in armed criminal violence and continue to perpetuate instability. Since Ethiopian forces deposed the Union of Islamic Courts in Somalia in January 2007, for instance, reports indicate that the Islamists' former arsenals are now available for anyone to purchase in the markets of Mogadishu.

When ex-combatants are demobilized at the end of a conflict and are faced with a lack of economic opportunities, some may turn to crime as the only viable means of survival. In some countries, there is actually a rise in the level of armed violence following the end of a conflict. Each year, armed crime in South Africa causes 80,000 bullet wounds that require hospitalization, even though the struggles of the apartheid era have ended. Small arms violence can also plague countries long at peace. Ghana, which has not experienced a major armed conflict, has suffered from a recent rise in armed crime resulting from the free flow of small arms from other regional conflict areas.

Excessive amounts of small arms in a community contribute to instability, hindering a society's chances for reconstruction after a conflict. An extensive survey by the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue found that, of those countries in which aid workers reported the highest prevalence and misuse of small arms, four of the top five were in Africa. Indeed, escalating small arms violence in Darfur in the fall of 2005 led to a massive evacuation of aid personnel, which has drastically reduced the number of people able to provide services to Sudanese displaced by the conflict.

The instability caused by small arms affects not only humanitarian aid provided during and in the immediate aftermath of a conflict; it can also damage the post-conflict development process. Often, a large portion of a nation's infrastructure and economy is destroyed during a conflict. Foreign investors may decide against funding crucial reconstruction projects if weaponry is perceived to be widely available and the security of an investment is not guaranteed.

Investment may continue to decrease even after the cessation of hostilities. A World Bank study found that, while the amount of private wealth that is divested from a country doubles during an armed conflict, it continues to rise for the next decade. The same study found that a civil war costs a country approximately 60 percent of its annual gross domestic product. Development projects throughout Africa have been stymied by lack of foreign investment because of continued instability and violence facilitated by small arms.

As nations struggle to acquire development and humanitarian assistance after a conflict, communities struggle with the long-lasting effects of small arms violence. The internal displacement caused by armed conflict puts entire populations at risk for disease transmission when clean food and water cannot be reliably secured and when sanitation systems break down. Civilians in camps for refugees and internally displaced populations are often specifically targeted by armed gangs. Children are sometimes abducted for use as soldiers. And women and girls may be victims of sexual violence at the barrel of a gun. Rather than providing safety and protection, camps such as those in Darfur can be hazardous for vulnerable populations.

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And the effects do not stop there. Armed conflict often uproots or separates families, leaving children orphaned or without social and economic support networks. In addition, schools may not be able to reopen because of continued instability, the loss of teachers, or a lack of resources to provide basic services. All of these factors limit children's opportunities for the future. More than half of school-age children and their teachers have stopped attending school in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where armed conflict has raged for more than a decade.

## THE CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

Continued conflict, combined with a lack of viable opportunities for youth and demobilized soldiers, can contribute to a culture of violence, in which weapons are viewed as symbols of power, dominance, and worth, as well as tools for conflict resolution. In many cases, a culture of impunity results, in which individuals and groups are not held accountable for their socially disruptive actions, and children do not understand the ramifications of violence.

Indeed, cultures of violence permeate various African communities. The lack of education or employment opportunities at home made war a particularly attractive option for youth throughout West Africa during the 1990s and early 2000s. As a result, many fought in more than one of the wars that took place in the region during that time.

Although not directly caused by small arms proliferation, child soldiering can be considered a consequential impact of the uncontrolled proliferation of these weapons. As many as 100,000 child soldiers are currently being used in combat across Africa. Their use in conflict is facilitated by the presence of small arms and light weapons: because these weapons are small and easy to use, children can be quickly trained to operate them.

Child soldiers are common in countries where conflicts have dragged on for years and where a substantial portion of the male population has either been killed or maimed. In nations such as Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo, many armed groups would be unable to wage war without the added troop strength provided by child soldiers wielding small arms. The Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, which has

waged an insurgency against the government for 20 years, is believed to have a fighting force made up of 80 percent child soldiers.

## NATIONAL RESPONSES

Small arms are a multifaceted issue and thus require multifaceted responses. Unlike landmines, or chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, small arms cannot be banned outright because of their legitimate military, police, and civilian uses. Thus, the international community must be creative in determining the types of policies that can best address the many problems caused by small arms. To be effective, these policies must control the supply of weapons, eliminate potentially dangerous stockpiles, reduce the misuse of small arms, and address demand. The policies need to be implemented at the national, regional, and global levels and must involve a variety of actors and resources.

First, the ease with which legal small arms move to the illicit market makes it crucial to harmonize national legislation. Before this harmonization can occur at regional and global levels, national governments need to develop and implement comprehensive national controls on, and establish consistent oversight of, the small arms trade.

According to analysis by the International Action Network on Small Arms, 34 of the 44 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have legislation regulating some portion of the small arms trade. Of these nations, only two require an assessment of the risk for diversion before authorizing a small arms transfer. By contrast, of the 41 European countries that have national legislation on small arms, 32 include provisions for assessing the risk of diversion before authorizing a small arms transfer. Arms brokers can easily take advantage of these national weaknesses to ensure that their transfers stay one step ahead of the law.

In addition, African countries are strengthening border security to help stem the flow of small arms. Many small arms are smuggled across the continent's porous borders, occasionally disguised as other, more harmless materials, such as food, development assistance, or farming implements. The international community has become more concerned with helping countries improve their border security in light of reported Al Qaeda and other terrorist group activity in Africa, particularly in East Africa.

As countries emerge from conflict, they can immediately take important steps to tackle small

arms proliferation at the national level. Peace agreements developed before the end of a conflict can and should include plans for the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) of combatants, in order to curb the potential negative effects of proliferated and misused small arms. For example, the DDR process outlined in the 1999 Lomé Accord, which ended the vicious civil war in Sierra Leone, succeeded in collecting the weapons of approximately 70,000 combatants from all sides of the fighting.

DDR programs, however, must be sure to address the specific and different roles that women and children play during conflicts, as well as their roles in the community, which can help yield more complete disarmament. Countries must also train their national police and militaries in the proper uses of force in accordance with international guidelines and standards. Such training will help prevent small arms misuse by government actors.

## REGIONAL INITIATIVES

While national efforts are important to curbing small arms proliferation and misuse, they must be reinforced and encouraged by regional initiatives. In 2000, all of sub-Saharan Africa signed the Bamako Declaration, which outlined a comprehensive, Africa-wide plan to address the illicit proliferation, circulation, and trafficking of small arms.

However, owing to the sheer size of Africa, as well as regional differences within the continent, governments have had the most success in establishing solutions to small arms proliferation at the subregional level. East Africa, Southern Africa, and West Africa have all created their own frameworks for establishing comprehensive controls on small arms that address problems specific to each region.

East African countries have adopted the Nairobi Protocol, which encourages participants to develop national legislation encompassing all aspects of the legal trade in small arms, and then to harmonize this legislation among the members of the protocol. Although the Seychelles, Sudan, and Tanzania have not yet ratified the protocol, it entered into force in May 2006. In March 2007, leaders from East African countries met in Kampala, Uganda, to create frameworks for region-wide policies in order to close remaining loopholes that facilitate illicit small arms trafficking. The Nairobi Protocol also encourages small arms registration to allow better tracing of weapons in cases of diversion.

The Southern African Development Community developed a Protocol on Firearms, Ammunition, and Related Materials in 2001. Parties to the protocol, which formally entered into force in November 2004, have already succeeded in developing regional standards for the marking of small arms, which would facilitate the tracing of weapons to uncover illicit trafficking, and are crafting and implementing national action plans according to those standards.

West Africa, however, has made the most dramatic strides toward curbing the illicit trade in small arms, with its unprecedented moratorium on the import or manufacture of small arms in the region. In 1998, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) established a politically binding moratorium on the import, export, and manufacture of small arms. In June 2006, the ECOWAS secretariat approved a legally binding version of the moratorium after the West Africa Action Network on Small Arms, a regional nongovernment organization assisted by the aid agency Oxfam, succeeded in developing acceptable treaty language. The convention now awaits the ratification of member states.

## INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

National and regional efforts to control small arms within Africa in turn require global support. Several initiatives aimed at countering the uncontrolled spread of small arms are currently being pursued at the international level, many of them through the UN. The most prominent of these is the UN Program of Action, which resulted from the landmark 2001 UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects. The Program of Action, a politically binding agreement, outlines states' responsibilities at the national, regional, and global levels to stem the illicit proliferation of small arms.

Meanwhile, the UN is working toward three international small arms agreements. The first is the International Arms Trade Treaty, which would establish international standards for the import, export, and transfer of conventional weapons, including small arms. In December 2006, the UN General Assembly voted to establish a Group of Governmental Experts to assess the feasibility and possible parameters of an arms trade treaty. The

successful vote of 153 to 1 included 33 votes of support from African countries. (The United States was the only nation to vote against the resolution.) Africa is also represented in the leadership of this effort: Kenya is one of the original cosponsors of the UN resolution and brings an African voice and perspective to the endeavor.

The UN has established working groups on the marking and tracing of weapons, and on controlling illicit arms brokering. Both working groups are moving toward international agreements to regulate the activities of arms brokers and to encourage a universal marking system for weapons.

The UN has also negotiated a Firearms Protocol, which aims to hinder illicit manufacturing and trade in small arms from a law enforcement—an arms control—perspective. This protocol, which is part of the UN Convention Against Transna-

tional Organized Crime, requires countries to criminalize illegal small arms manufacture and trafficking and increase cross-border cooperation and information-sharing to stop illicit transfers,

among other obligations. Twenty-one of the protocol's 52 ratifications are from African countries.

Although it does not speak directly to the issue of small arms, the UN Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict has 114 ratifications, with 19 by African countries. This treaty aims to prevent the conscription, recruitment, and use of child soldiers. In February 2007, the UN Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, described the remobilization of former child soldiers in Sudan. She reported that former child soldiers "want to get back into the armed forces because they are used to carrying a gun, they have social status with a gun, and they just can't get back into their communities." Helping former child soldiers reintegrate into society goes hand in hand with efforts to end cultures of violence and curb the proliferation and misuse of small arms.

## MIXED COMPLIANCE

Although African countries are willing to sign and ratify treaties, their compliance with the UN Program of Action has been less than complete. It has taken five years for 39 of the 44 sub-Saharan countries to even designate a national

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