

THE PROBLEM OF LIGHT WEAPONS

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Background

In the early 1990s, a number of governments and international organizations began to acknowledge the grim security situation in much of the developing world and the threat this posed to hopes for achieving sustainable development. This recognition came in part because the Cold War's end permitted a new look at critical problems in developing countries, and in part because sheer practical considerations would no longer permit avoiding the problems. Among the most disturbing facts they faced:

- According to the World Bank, more than 50 countries had experienced significant periods of conflict since 1980. Civilians accounted for at least 90% of the casualties. Fifteen of the world's 20 poorest countries experienced a major conflict in the period between 1992-97. In a number of cases, these conflicts led to a complete breakdown of the state. Thirty countries had more than 10% of their populations displaced by conflict, either internally or as refugees in other countries. In 10 countries, more than 40% were displaced.²
- According to SIPRI, in the 12-year post-cold war period 1990-2001 there were 57 major armed conflicts in 45 different locations.³
- The humanitarian workers delivering relief are increasingly at risk. The UN reported, for example, that 180 of its workers have been killed between 1992 and 1998; in 1998, for the first time, more civilian aid workers were killed than military peacekeepers.⁴
- Even after conflicts ostensibly end, violence continues in many societies where weak governments cannot provide basic security for their people.⁵

Most of the conflicts causing this devastation are civil conflicts and most are being fought with vast quantities of cheap, durable, and increasingly deadly light weapons.⁶ Much of the world

¹ This paper reflects the personal views of the author, not official positions of the National Academy of Sciences. It is adapted from "The Proliferation of Conventional Weapons," in Michael E. Brown, editor. *Grave New World: Security Challenges in the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003.

² World Bank, *Post-Conflict Reconstruction: The Role of the World Bank* (Washington, DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1998), p.2.

³ The figures are from the SIPRI website announcement of the 2002 Yearbook (<http://editors.sipri.se/pubs/yb02/app01a.htmlreport>).

⁴ Judith Miller, "UN Workers Become Targets in Angry Lands," *The New York Times* (September 19, 1999, p.A1 and A6). For a discussion of the dilemmas facing the International Red Cross, see Michael Ignatieff, "Unarmed Warriors," *The New Yorker* (March 24, 1997), pp.54-71.

⁵ For a discussion of El Salvador, where by some reports civilian casualties have been as high in the post-conflict period as during the 12-year civil war, see Edward J. Laurance, *The New Field of Microdisarmament: Addressing the Proliferation and Buildup of Small Arms and Light Weapons*. (Bonn, Germany: Bonn International Center for Conversion, September 1996), p.60.

⁶ "Light weapons," according to one leading scholar, includes "all those conventional munitions that can be carried by an individual combatant or by a light vehicle operating on back-country roads." Michael T. Klare, "The Global Trade in Light Weapons and the International System in the Post-Cold War Era," in Jeffrey Boutwell, Michael T. Klare, and Laura W. Reed, eds. *Lethal Commerce: The Global Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons*. (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1995), p. 33.

is inundated with these weapons, many of which are rugged and durable, with long lifespans. This has meant that automatic rifles left behind by U.S. forces in Vietnam have found their way to conflicts in Central America and the Middle East. In Africa and elsewhere, as one conflict ends weapons flow across porous borders for use in the next. Light weapons are also a standard part of the inventories of global organized crime syndicates, with insurgent groups or governments under international embargoes sometimes allying themselves with these syndicates to trade commodities from areas under their control for weapons.⁷

The amount and quality of information available about transfers (sales and aid) of major conventional weapons vary widely, but data about the volume and values of light weapons transfers and stocks are far worse. A significant portion of the trade in light weapons is illegal, and governments continue covert transfers of arms to other governments or to insurgent groups. Huge surplus stocks left over from the Cold War and enormous quantities of weapons already in circulation further complicate efforts to accumulate reliable estimates.⁸ Dubious or distorted figures sometimes take hold and enjoy wide circulation.

With these caveats, important information is available. In the late 1990s, the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency estimated that 13% of the international arms trade, consists of small arms and light weapons and ammunition.⁹ According to the 2002 edition of the *Small Arms Survey*, more than 20 countries now report their exports of light weapons. The Survey identified 1,000 companies in 98 countries involved in some aspect of the production of small arms or ammunition; 13 countries, however, dominate the market.¹⁰ Estimates of the number of legal and illegal military and civilian-style firearms currently in circulation worldwide range from 500 million to over 1 billion.¹¹ The reports produced by researchers and journalists in the field have added significantly to our understanding of scope of light weapons transfers.¹²

⁷ The recent international attention to the problems of “conflict diamonds” is an example. An unusually candid UN report on the problems in Angola is United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Panel of Experts on Violations of Security Council Sanctions against UNITA* (March 10, 2000, S/2000/203); online at <http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/committees/Angola/AngolaSpecEng.htm>.

⁸ For reports on surplus weapons, large and small, see the publications of the Bonn International Center for Conversion at <http://www.bicc.de>

⁹ These figures are cited in Michael Renner, “Arms Control Orphans,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (January/February 1999), pp.24-26 (<http://www.thebulletin.org/issues/1999/jf99/jf99renner.html>). The footnotes in Renner’s monograph, *Small Arms, Big Impact: The Next Challenge of Disarmament* (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, 1997), are a good source for the origins of various commonly cited statistics and estimates. The monograph is available online at <http://secure.worldwatch.org/cgi-bin/wwinst/EWWP0137?7sVWkMTf:40>.

¹⁰ “Key Finding,” Press Release, Geneva, Switzerland: Small Arms Survey, June 2002. The Small Arms Survey, produced by a project based at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, is attempting to develop systematic data on light weapons production and trade. The project’s website is <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/>. Another important resource is the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers; its website is <http://nisat.org>.

¹¹ Renner, pp.24.

¹² One of the pioneering sources of such analysis is the Arms Project of Human Rights Watch; a list of reports can be found at <http://www.hrw.org/about/projects/arms/index.htm>. Serious research on the problem began in the mid-1990s and there is now an international group of scholars and analysts in nongovernmental organizations producing a steadily growing volume of studies. One volume that offers a good reflection of the research available is Jeffrey Boutwell and Michael T. Klare, eds., *Light Weapons and Civil Conflict: Controlling the Tools of Violence* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

Efforts to Control Light Weapons

As increasing attention focused on the light weapons issue, proposals have come from many quarters. As discussed below, the first major effort focused on a single weapon, antipersonnel landmines. Along with landmines, considerable attention initially went to measures that put light weapons in the context of the conflicts in which they were used, and sought to identify policies suitable to a conflict's different phases.¹³ Very roughly, measures to stem the proliferation of light weapons that are linked to the stages of a conflict can be divided into those that apply before a conflict or in its early stages, those that apply while conflict is raging, and those that once a conflict ends. For example, tracking flows of weapons could offer early warning of potential outbreaks of violence and the opportunity for preventive action.¹⁴ While conflicts are underway, limits or outright embargoes on arms supplies are the obvious control mechanism, since access to supplies of weapons can be a significant factor in sustaining adversaries' abilities to continue to fight.¹⁵ Much more research and experience have accumulated regarding the weapons left over when a conflict ostensibly ends.¹⁶ These measures seek to reinforce the settlements and also to prevent weapons used in the one conflict from flowing to another.¹⁷

The conflict-process perspective remains important, particularly for the implementation of peace settlements. Over time, however, two other perspectives have gained prominence. The social devastation created by the "culture of violence" in many countries, facilitated by the ready availability of light weapons, has led to a broader concern with curbing illicit arms transfers and to important links to other efforts to restore basic security to citizens.¹⁸ A third approach, growing out of the practical problems for relief and reconstruction that incited UN attention, emphasizes a development perspective to find measures to affect the "demand side" for weapons.¹⁹ All of the approaches are linked and the distinctions among them often blur, especially on the ground in conflict-ridden countries. But they do represent different basic motivations for wanting to address the light weapons problem and bring different constituencies into the process of developing and implementing policy.

¹³ For an early argument for this approach, see Jo L. Husbands, "Controlling Transfers of Light Weapons: Linkages to Conflict Processes and Conflict Resolution Strategies," in *Lethal Commerce*.

¹⁴ See Edward J. Laurance, (ed.), *Arms Watching: Integrating Small Arms and Light Weapons into the Early Warning of Violent Conflict*. London: International Alert, 1999.

¹⁵ See fn.7 and Michael Brzoska (ed.), *Design and Implementation of Arms Embargoes and Travel and Aviation Related Sanctions: Results of the "Bonn-Berlin Process"*. Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion, 2003 (<http://www.smartsanctions.de/>).

¹⁶ See, for example, the multivolume series of the Disarmament and Conflict Resolution Project of UNIDIR produced in 1995-97, especially *Managing Arms in Peace Processes: The Issues* (Geneva: UNIDIR, UNIDIR/96/46, 1996), and Cindy Collins and Thomas G. Weiss, *An Overview and Assessment of 1989-1996 Peace Operations Publications* (Providence, RI: Thomas J. Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, 1997).

¹⁷ Sami Faltas, Glenn McDonald, and Camilla Waszink, "Removing Small Arms from Society: A Review of Weapons Collection and Destruction Programmes," Occasional Paper No. 2, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, July 2001 (online at <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/OccasionalPapers.html>).

¹⁸ Jacklyn Cock, "A Sociological Account of Light Weapons Proliferation in South Africa," in Jasjit Singh, ed., *Light Weapons and International Security* (Dehli: Indian Pugwash Society and British American Security Information Council, 1995).

¹⁹ See, for example, the World Bank report and the Founding Document of IANSA.

One of the most interesting features of the light weapons problem is that the leading actors in efforts to address their implications for international security are frequently those most affected. The best known example is probably the coalition of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that achieved an international ban on antipersonnel landmines. In an effort that ultimately earned them the Nobel Peace Prize, a group of NGOs banded together in the early 1990s to form the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. The original members of the NGO coalition were human rights and humanitarian groups who came to the issue out of frustration that their basic humanitarian missions were being blocked by the indiscriminate use of landmines in areas of conflict.²⁰ Traditional peace and arms control groups, although they ultimately made a significant contribution to achieving the landmines ban, were still followers rather than instigators of this campaign.²¹

This was the first example of the growing importance of NGOs in affecting national and international policy on arms transfers. The campaign, joined over time by a growing number of international organizations and governments, led to the "Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production, and Transfer of Antipersonnel Mines and on their Destruction" (the Ottawa Convention). Signed by 122 countries in Ottawa, Canada on 3 December 1997, the convention entered into force in March 1999.²²

Subsequent international efforts to address the problems caused by light weapons reflect some of the lessons learned during the campaign that led to the Ottawa Convention.²³ It also reflects the commitment of a relatively small group of researchers, some in academia but many from NGOs, to raise awareness of the human toll the weapons were taking. In addition to the research conferences typical to any field, a self-conscious effort was made to build an international NGO coalition. Like the campaign to ban landmines, the groups included both organizations traditionally concerned with peace and security and humanitarian organizations. In August 1998, 45 individuals representing 33 NGOs from 18 countries held an initial strategy session in Canada. From that came a meeting in Brussels in October 1998, which attracted 180 participants from over 100 NGOs. The "International Action Network on Small Arms" created in those meetings was formally launched in May 1999 at the much larger Hague Appeal for Peace. The IANSA Founding Document, with its long lists of proposed actions to address both the supply and demand sides of the trade in light weapons, gives a good reflection of the diversity of interests within the coalition.²⁴

²⁰ The original members of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines were Handicap International, Human Rights Watch, Medico International, Mines Advisory Group, Physicians for Human Rights, and the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation.

²¹ For a case study of the effort to ban landmines, see Motoko Mekata, "Building Partnerships toward a Common Goal: Experiences of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines," in Ann M. Florini, ed., *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), pp 143-176.

²² As of mid-2003, 147 nations had signed or acceded to the Ottawa Convention, including all NATO member states except the United States and Turkey, and all European Union member states except Finland.

²³ The Florini volume examines the broader question of the new and enhanced role of NGOs in international politics.

²⁴ The International Action Network on Small Arms now includes over 340 organizations from 71 countries; further information, including the Founding Document, may be found on the IANSA website at <http://www.iansa.org>. The website also contains links to a number of other organizations and sources of information about light weapons.

On the international level, beginning in the late 1980s the United Nations began a remarkable new effort – paying attention to the weapons that were actually causing the casualties in the conflicts that affected many member nations. For years, member states had demanded that the focus remain on weapons of mass destruction, in part out of genuine concern with the superpower arms race and in part to avoid international “interference” in their internal affairs. Now, led by afflicted countries such as Colombia, some of the countries most affected by light weapons brought the issue to the world body. In 1995 UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali proposed a new focus on *microdisarmament* – “practical disarmament in the context of the conflicts the United Nations is actually dealing with and of the weapons, most of them light weapons, that are actually killing people in the hundreds of thousands.”²⁵ As the UN expert group he commissioned concluded in its pathbreaking 1997 report:

Accumulations of small arms and light weapons by themselves do not cause the conflicts in which they are used. The availability of these weapons, however, contributes toward exacerbating conflicts by increasing the lethality and duration of violence, by encouraging a violent rather than a peaceful resolution of differences, and by generating a vicious circle of a greater sense of insecurity, which in turn leads to a greater demand for, and use of, such weapons.²⁶

The dilemmas facing relief and aid workers that drove Boutros Boutros-Ghali to call for microdisarmament has also led an increasing number of donor countries and even the major international financial institutions to address security issues. The initiatives are taken most commonly in the context of post-conflict reconstruction. In 1997, for example, the World Bank created a special unit devoted to these problems. The Post-Conflict Unit funded research as well as operational programs on the ground, with much of its work focused on demobilization and reintegration of combatants, an area that fit quite comfortably within the Bank’s mandate.²⁷

The Post-Conflict Unit has now been renamed the Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Unit, but the fundamental point of an unavoidable recognition of the links between development and security issues remains valid.²⁸ A number of the major donor countries, including Canada, Belgium, Sweden, and Norway have become actively engaged in projects reflecting development-security linkages, in part through supporting the activities of NGOs. Under the leadership of Clare Short, the Department of International Development in Great Britain produced a series of important policy statements.²⁹ This is part of a broader commitment to what has come to be known as “human security” or “citizen security.”

²⁵ United Nations, *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, Document A/50/60-S/1995/1, 1995).

²⁶ United Nations, *General and Complete Disarmament: Small Arms* (New York: United Nations, Document A/52/298, August 27, 1997), pp.9-10.

²⁷ Returning former soldiers to productive economic activity is considered an appropriate activity for the Bank. In a similar way, its funding for humanitarian demining is undertaken to return land to productive use.

²⁸ The description of the work of the unit may be found at <http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/essd/essd.nsf/96144278b17f6ab1852567cf006967ef/480305e60010b3fb852567ed004cb0bc?OpenDocument>.

²⁹ See, for example, the 1999 policy statements by the Department on *Poverty and the Security Sector and Conflict Reduction and Humanitarian Assistance*. The DFID website is <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/>.

The problems of illicit arms transfers – and their obvious links to other problems, such as terrorism and transnational crime – have brought in another set of actors from domestic, regional, and international law enforcement. Although in principle these initiatives are not limited to light weapons, in practice this has been the primary emphasis. Again, activities initiated by the countries most affected, using existing regional organizations where possible and building new coalitions where necessary, is one of the notable features of this effort. The Organization of American States (OAS), for example, undertook two important actions:

- The OAS Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) used an experts group to create a set of Model Regulations to Control the Movement of Firearms, Ammunition, and Firearms Parts and Components. The regulations, adopted in November 1997, encourage regulation and licensing of firearms transfers by all OAS member states and seek to standardize practices throughout the hemisphere.
- At the initiative of the Mexican government, the OAS Permanent Council completed an Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials.³⁰

The major supplier countries have also taken up the cause of curbing illicit arms transfers. In 1997 the European Union (EU) adopted a Programme for Preventing and Combating Illicit Trafficking in Conventional Arms. The program makes an explicit link between peace and security and economic development and reconstruction. It seeks to combat illicit trafficking on or through EU territories, to provide capacity-building in other countries, and to develop measures to reduce the number of weapons in circulation. Most of the EU effort is focused on Africa.³¹

On the international level, in May 2001 the United Nations General Assembly added a Firearms Protocol to the 2000 Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, declaring criminal such offences as illicit manufacturing and trafficking in firearms, their parts, components and ammunition, and falsifying or altering the markings on firearms. The purpose of the new instrument is to strengthen cooperation among States Parties in order to prevent, combat and eradicate illicit activities involving firearms and ammunition. Supporters argue that the new instrument creates a global standard for the transnational movement to prevent theft and diversion of firearms, while providing law enforcement officials with tools to effectively detect, investigate and prosecute illicit manufacturing and trafficking offences.³²

Much of the UN's attention has been confined to illegal and illicit transfers, in part because of reluctance by the United States to address the domestically difficult question of limits on legal transfers. In July 2001, the UN Special Session on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects almost foundered when the United States took strong positions against

³⁰ The text of the Convention may be found at <http://www.iansa.org/documents/regional/reg5.htm>. Information about the Model Regulations and a copy of the text may be found at <http://www.unlirec.org/regional.html>, the website of the UN Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean. See also William Godnick, *The Organization of American States and the 2001 United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects: Tackling the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons*: (London: BASIC, International Alert, Saferworld, and the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress, January 2002).

³¹ The text of the Programme may be found at <http://www.iansa.org/documents/regional/reg6.htm>.

³² Information about the Protocol and the Convention may be found at http://www.odccp.org/crime_cicp_signatures.html.

restrictions on civilian gun ownership or a ban on transfers to non-state actors.³³ Many of the NGOs who had worked for months in preparation for the special session expressed strong disappointment. Nonetheless, the Programme of Action at the end of the conference did call for a review conference in 2006, thus further legitimating continued UN engagement on the issue.³⁴ And in a further encouraging sign, in late August 2001 the UN Security Council made clear its continuing concern with the burdens that the light weapons problem pose for carrying out its essential peace and security missions.

Prospects for Light Weapons Controls

Since the early 1990s, most of the energy of scholars and activists interested in the international arms trade has gone to the problem of light weapons. The reasons are obvious: these are the weapons that, in miserable, grinding civil conflicts, on a day-to-day basis account for thousands of casualties, mostly among civilians, and that, when wars do end, stand in the way of hopes for effective post-conflict reconstruction and sustainable development. The achievements in just a few years after decades of purposeful neglect are significant, but what remains to be done is so enormous that it is easy to become discouraged. The policy tools available can appear woefully inadequate, successes small and infrequent, and governmental will for efforts at control hard to muster. Regional and international conflict resolution is not adequately developed, and once cycles of violence begin, breaking them is immensely difficult. The resources required to rebuild war-torn societies, including removing the arsenals accumulated in the course of conflict, too frequently fall short. Yet looking ahead, this problem is going to remain on the international security agenda because the consequences of ignoring its toll have finally become too big to ignore. Any serious efforts to address the security challenges of the 21st century will have to include the light weapons problem.

³³ For a statement of the ultimate U.S. policy toward the conference, see John R. Bolton, Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, "Plenary Address to the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons," July 9, 2001 (online at <http://www.state.gov/t/us/rm/2001/index.cfm?docid=4038>)

³⁴ United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Lights Weapons in All Its Aspects, "Programme of Action" (online at <http://www.un.org/Depts/dda/update/jun2001/article2.htm>).