

LIGHT WEAPONS AND THE PROLIFERATION OF ARMED CONFLICTS

The accumulation of small arms during the past decade has contributed to a proliferation of intra-state armed conflicts and caused tremendous human suffering. Inexpensive to purchase, available in abundance and requiring little training, small arms were the weapon of choice in 46 of the 49 major conflicts since 1990. The victims of these weapons were mainly civilians, with women and children accounting for over 80% of firearm-related deaths. For every single casualty, more than five people were directly or indirectly affected through displacement.

The small arms in use today were acquired through legal and illegal channels of supply, and include massive quantities left over from the Cold War. As a fallout of earlier procurement, an estimated two million weapons are still circulating in Central America, seven million in West Africa and ten million in Afghanistan.

Although the weapons themselves do not cause the conflicts in which they are used, their proliferation and easy availability exacerbate the degree of violence by increasing the lethality and duration of hostilities, and encouraging violent rather than peaceful resolutions of differences. The resultant culture of violence obstructs peace-building and the launching of economic and social recovery in post-war societies. Without appropriate disarmament—involving the collection of residual small arms and the storage of state-owned weapons in protected areas—programmes for national reconciliation and rehabilitation cannot be sustained.

The United Nations Development Programme deals with the issue of small arms from a human development perspective. Mandated by the United Nations Policy on Small Arms* to address the socio-economic consequences of weapons proliferation, UNDP supports governments and civil society in the formulation and implementation of weapons collection and demobilization initiatives which aim to create a safe environment that is conducive to sustainable development (* "Coordinating Action on Small Arms: The United Nations Policy," Department for Disarmament Affairs, 19 June 1998).

The Social and Economic Price of Light Weapons

UNDP's approach to small arms is founded on the proposition that the diffusion of weapons, especially their continued availability in post-conflict situations, not only undermines a country's ability to sustain peace, but represents a major block to sustainable human development.

Since 1990, protracted armed confrontations in developing countries have destroyed years of progress in building social infrastructure, promoting economic development, establishing functioning government institutions and fostering community-level solidarity. Some regional interventions to restore and maintain order in conflict and post-conflict countries have cost as much as several million dollars per day.

The economic effects of illicit weapons are well-documented. In Latin America, where firearms are easily available and the rates of weapon-related death and injury high, the costs have been estimated at 14% of GDP in terms of health and damage to person and property. ("The Humanitarian Implications of Small Arms Proliferation." OCHA, 9 October 1998). In Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, the growing availability of military-style light weapons has made crime the primary social problem. Car jacking, kidnapping, assaults, robberies, and trafficking of contraband are commonplace.

This crime and violence have disastrous effects on the ability of affected countries to implement their national development programmes. Vital infrastructure needed for development projects is damaged by arms-related insecurity, while foreign-funded development projects must be canceled or postponed to prevent the assets from being diverted toward criminal activities. Countries must also allocate large portions of their already limited resources to security measures, thereby decreasing the funds available for development.

Governments are increasingly viewing the establishment of a secure environment as a precondition for economic and social progress in areas affected by small arms and have engaged their development partners in dialogue to support security-related initiatives as an integral component in development cooperation.

The Role of the UN System and the International Community

The United Nations has gained considerable experience in dealing with light weapons as part of peace operations, and through its inquiries into illicit arms acquisitions. Mandated by General Assembly Resolutions 50/70 B and 52/38 J to address the problem of small arms and light weapons, the UN has delineated five mutually supportive objectives:

- to retain the lead in putting the issue of small arms on the global agenda by projecting itself as a catalyst, and a clearing house for different initiatives
- to assume a coordinating role in channeling the growing international concern about small arms into realistic and attainable goals
- to encourage widespread involvement of civil society in building societal resistance to the illegitimate use of small arms and light weapons
- to strengthen the UN's ability to respond speedily and effectively to requests for assistance by areas affected by light weapons and their illicit traffic
- to ensure that the above objectives are pursued within the framework of the UN's objectives in the field of disarmament

Within the UN system, the Department for Disarmament Affairs (DDA) is the focal point for ensuring a cohesive UN approach to the challenge posed by small arms. In 1998, a mechanism to Coordinate Action on Small Arms (CASA) was established to provide a forum for consultation among the different UN departments and agencies involved in issues related to light weapons.

The success of the campaign to ban landmines demonstrated that a weapon-specific focus can galvanize public and governmental support to alleviate suffering and prevent conflict. Similar efforts have been launched regarding small arms, with encouraging achievements to date: in April 1998, over fifty countries signed a draft resolution of the UN Economic and Social Council, calling on the United Nations and its individual Member States to adopt laws and a treaty aimed at curbing the illicit trade in small arms.

Mali's "Security First" Approach to Conflict Resolution and Development

Peacemaking in Mali has been built around a delicate process of building trust and promoting non-violent resolution between the Government of Mali and the Tuareg movements in the northern part of the country. Following years of unrest that began after the 1991 overthrow of Moussa Toure's 23-year military dictatorship, peace negotiations culminated at the end of 1995 in an agreement by 3,000 fighters to a process of containment and reintegration. This first achievement built enough confidence for an additional 10,000 ex-combatants to come forward in the following years and exchange their weapons for the possibility to reinsert themselves into civilian life.

Mali's remarkable success in sidestepping civil war was initiated by a request from Malian President Alpha Oumar Konaré for UN assistance in tackling the country's small arms problem. In early 1995, the UN sent assessment missions to Mali and neighboring countries, while Malian authorities established a commission on small arms.

At a major Round Table between donors and Malian authorities in Timbuktu, the government called for a large-scale programme to rehabilitate Northern Mali and bring "life back to normal" in the region. To do so, the government stressed the need to reestablish security, arguing that there could be no development or no sustainable peace without first demobilizing the rebels and facilitating their reintegration into civilian society. UNDP was the government's main partner in organizing the Round Table and designing the peace-building programme.

As a first step, the Government withdrew many of its military forces from the North of the country, and allowed civil society to take the lead in convincing the rebels to disarm. The authorities reentered the peace process to arrange for the demobilization and cantonment of the former rebels, and to provide training for their integration into the Malian army or civil society. Together with the UN Department for Political Affairs, UNDP also initiated the creation of a Trust Fund for North Mali, to raise support for the peace and development process. Although many nations pledged resources to the fund, the most memorable donation was made by the Government of Mali: by contributing \$1 million—a huge budgetary effort for a developing country—the Government affirmed its commitment to a true joint partnership between donors and recipients.

To symbolize the end of the conflict and emphasize its commitment to promoting peace and development for the whole of Mali, the Government organized a dramatic ceremony, known internationally as the Flame of Peace, where 3,000 deposited weapons were publicly burned in Timbuktu in March 1996.

Moratorium on Light Weapons in West Africa

Until 1996, most efforts to control arms flow had been a matter of supplier countries concerned primarily with weapons of mass destruction. Today's wars, however, are increasingly being fought with light weapons and small arms carried by individual combatants, and few of the actors involved—whether state or non-state—produce the munitions they use. The weapons are imported through legal international channels or through the black market.

To help counter the extensive proliferation of light weapons in Mali and the subregion, the Government of Mali made a unique proposition in November 1996 at a conference on "Conflict Prevention, Disarmament and Development in West Africa" to create a moratorium on the export, import and manufacture of light weapons in West Africa.

Held in Timbuktu, the conference was organized by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), the Department for Political Affairs (DPA), UNDP and the Government of Mali.

The moratorium's three main objectives are:

- to prevent conflict
- to clear the way for social and economic development
- to decrease crime rates

The conference participants also recommended that a dialogue consolidate the future moratorium regime with the arms manufacturing and supplier States under the Wassenaar Arrangement. In April 1998, the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfer (NISAT), with the support of UNDP, convened the first multilateral consultation of West African governments and Wassenaar member states.

In late October 1998, sixteen states in West Africa signed the moratorium, thereby agreeing to ban the production, import and export of small arms for a three-year trial period.

Programme for Coordination on Security and Development

To backstop the implementation of the moratorium, UNDP established and operates the "Programme for Coordination and Assistance on Security and Development" (PCASED). This technical programme assists with practical development and security-related activities, including assistance in disposing of surplus weapons in countries that have been affected by conflict.

PCASED's overall objectives are:

- to coordinate the efforts of Member States in matters of security, peace and disarmament
- to provide technical assistance for the implementation of Member States' policies in disarmament and security issues
- to support the efforts of Member States in setting up and revitalizing national commissions in charge of fighting weapons proliferation
- to promote the establishment of databases on weapons flow
- to provide technical support for efforts to sensitize new Member States to declare the moratorium

- to support efforts to update and harmonize national legislation on the bearing, use, and production of light weapons
- to support efforts to establish a subregional register on light weapons
- to provide technical support for border controls in connection with light weapons
- to organize training programmes for law and order forces to improve efficiency

UNDP works closely with governments, donors, civil society, the UN Department of Political Affairs, the Department of Disarmament Affairs and the UN Institute for Disarmament Research to promote PCASED, the concrete manifestation of the “security first” approach to sustainable human development.

Weapons Collection for Development in Albania

The small European country of Albania has undergone radical changes throughout the past ten years. A gradual breakdown of the state industrial sector and a sharp decline in other job opportunities during the early 1990s resulted in large-scale unemployment and emigration to neighboring countries. When a popular system of "pyramid" investment schemes collapsed in late 1996, many Albanians lost their life savings and turned to protest and destruction of institutions with perceived links to the Government.

About 1,300 army depots were looted, resulting in the dispersal of over half a million weapons—military-issue rifles, pistols, landmines and grenades—to civilians throughout the country. This spreading of guns further exacerbated tensions between rival groups and led to widespread banditry.

Following a request from Albania for UN assistance in collecting the weapons, a United Nations fact-finding mission to Albania in June 1998 decided to adopt an innovative approach based on advocacy and provision of development incentives to urge people at the community level to return the weapons.

A UNDP pilot project was launched in Gramsh, a district of about 100 villages in central Albania where an estimated 10,000 illegal arms were scattered throughout a population of 50,000. Headed by community leaders, the villages in Gramsh provided a readily available structure for direct participation in the arms surrender process.

This unique project combines weapons collection with needs assessments to identify small-scale, participatory development projects, such as telecommunications, road projects and street lighting. Most projects are labour-intensive infrastructural repairs which help generate employment in the local area, and provide an extra incentive for disarmament.

Non-governmental organizations have also initiated media campaigns to encourage the populations to voluntarily surrender their weapons and ammunition.

This UNDP project is supported by the open-ended Group of Member States interested in promoting measures of practical disarmament, established last year in pursuance of General Assembly resolution 52/38 G. Rough cost estimates for the initiative are around \$2 million over a two-year period. Continued donor support is essential to expand the programme into other districts and communes in Albania.

Trust Fund for the Reduction of Small Arms Proliferation

With support and advocacy assistance from the Government of Norway, UNDP has established a “Trust Fund for support to prevention and reduction of the proliferation of small arms”, to be used for the disbursement of funds for strategic and catalytic interventions in the following disarmament and development activities:

- Public information campaigns at the national, regional and international levels to advocate against small arms
- Strengthening capacity, cooperation and legislation on control mechanisms for small arms
- Reinforcing capacity for cooperation, training and information-sharing between law and order forces and customs officials
- Weapons collection/destruction programmes, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants.

Definition of “Small Arms”

At present, there is no universally accepted definition of small arms and light weapons. While the weapons used in today’s conflicts include virtually any instrument of lethality, ranging from stones and machetes to shoulder-fired missiles, the mandate of the United Nations in this field focuses on the following weapons:

Small Arms

- Revolvers and self-loading pistols
- Assault rifles, rifles and carbines
- Sub-machine-guns and light machine-guns

Light Weapons

- Heavy machine-guns
- Hand-held and mounted grenade launchers
- Portable anti-aircraft guns
- Portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles
- Portable launchers of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missile systems
- Mortars of calibres of less than 100 mm

Ammunition & Explosives

- Cartridges (rounds) for small arms
- Shells and missiles for light weapons
- Mobile containers with missiles or shells for single-action anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems
- Anti-personnel and anti-tank hand grenades
- Landmines and Explosives

