
Small Arms Control Old Weapons, New Issues

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Foreword

Small arms and light weapons have been in existence since the beginning of time. As tools of combat, they have gained increasing notoriety in the 1990s. Readily available and easy to use, small arms and light weapons have been the primary or sole tools of violence in almost every recent conflict dealt with by the United Nations—from Bosnia to Rwanda.

In December 1995, when the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to carry out a study on the excessive and destabilizing accumulation of small arms and light weapons, it was essentially a new issue for the global disarmament agenda. The Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms concluded that every part of the United Nations system was dealing in one way or another with the issue.

It is clear that the repercussions of the proliferation of small arms are felt far and wide. Particularly urgent, therefore, is the need to confront the problems arising from the consequences of the armed conflicts, insecurity, violence, crime and displacement resulting directly or indirectly from the illegitimate possession and violent use of small arms in contravention of accepted humanitarian norms.

The report of the Panel has already acted as a catalyst in attracting international attention and in providing compelling evidence for global action. In preparing that report, the members of the Panel offered more than their time and expertise. They made voluntary financial contributions in order to reach out and consult with those actually affected by the violent use and illegitimate accumulation of small arms—in Southern Africa, in Central America, and in South Asia.

The international community is in debt to the members of the Panel, as well as to the governments who hosted the Panel's workshops in some of the more severely affected sub-regions.

I am confident that this volume of information and analyses collected by the Panel will be received with great interest by all who share our concern, and wish to understand the origins the UN's mission to confront the challenge of small arms, effectively and successfully.

Kofi A. Annan
UN Secretary-General

Prologue

Mitsuro Donowaki*

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons is a relatively new disarmament challenge. While these weapons have been integral to militaries and police forces around the world throughout the century, prior to World War II small arms made to military specifications were not readily accessible to ordinary citizens.

The flooding of many parts of the world with these weapons was an unfortunate side-effect of the Cold War. The bi-polar division of the world and the advent of nuclear weapons caused the superpowers to carry out their military competition through proxy wars in the developing world. East and West justified weapons shipments to opposing forces in these confrontations on the basis of a need to support national liberation movements or to suppress guerrilla activities. In these conflicts, small arms and light weapons were very often used indiscriminately against non-combatants, precisely in order to undermine stability and topple governments.

Also throughout the Cold War, as more and more countries developed technologically, the capability to produce small arms and light weapons began to proliferate widely. In some cases manufacturers in the developed countries licensed the local production of infantry weapons, and in others local industrialists reverse-engineered the armaments.

The resulting widespread proliferation of light weapons has victimized millions of civilians and destroyed the socio-economic infrastructure in many areas of the world. Even when conflicts have ceased, there is all too often an alarming increase in armed criminal activity which threatens the ability of governments to restore law and order and to resume economic development.

In spite of the widespread suffering and devastating consequences, little attention has been paid to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Preoccupation with the East-West confrontation—and fear of nuclear war—has been a principal reason for this indifference, and even with the end of the Cold War, the world is still very much focused on the menace of weapons of mass destruction. However, there is a growing awareness that the international community can no longer continue to ignore the serious problems posed by the unchecked spread of military-style small arms.

As a manifestation of this new consciousness, in 1995 the United Nations General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to undertake preparation of a report on small arms, with the assistance of a Panel of Governmental Experts. In his foreword to that study—which was presented to the General Assembly on 27 August 1997—the Secretary-General noted that “small arms and light weapons have been the primary or sole tools of violence in almost every recent conflict dealt with by the United Nations. In the hands of irregular troops operating with

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scant respect for international and humanitarian law, these weapons have taken a heavy toll of human lives, with women and children accounting for nearly 80 percent of the casualties.” (UN Doc. A/52/298, p. 2)

I had the pleasure of chairing the panel of experts from 16 governments, which prepared this report. Our effort was the first attempt by the international community at the governmental level to study the nature and causes of the excessive and destabilizing accumulation and transfers of these weapons. This effort also represented the first attempt ever by the United Nations to arrive at recommendations on ways and means to deal with the particular dangers and challenges posed by small arms.

The panel made 24 concrete, practical and urgent recommendations, grouped under the headings of “reduction measures” and “prevention measures.” First, in order to reduce the already excessive accumulation of small arms in regions of conflict and post-conflict, weapons collection and destruction programmes must be implemented. However, in most regions emerging from civil conflict, people are unwilling to turn in weapons until their safety is guaranteed through adequate internal security measures. Employment opportunities must also be a priority, especially for former combatants. Accordingly, the panel’s report advocated the adoption of the so-called “proportional and integrated approach to security and development” which was initiated by the United Nations in Mali and other West African states. Our conclusion points to a need for a comprehensive approach to resolving this complex problem, rather than a purely disarmament approach.

When it comes to the question of how to prevent the further excessive accumulation of light arms, a concerted effort by all states will be necessary, given the global nature of production of these weapons. The report contained specific recommendations on safeguarding and disposing of surplus small and light arms. In addition, the panel recommended that the United Nations convene a conference on all aspects of the illicit arms trade, which is a principal source of light weapons supply.

As with all international negotiations, the agreed recommendations in some ways represent the “lowest common denominator.” More consciousness-raising is needed before all states will be ready to move forward with appropriate urgency on the complicated task of stemming the spread of light arms.

That is where this book comes in. The panel of governmental experts was greatly assisted in the preparation of its report by four expert workshops. The first of these was held in New York on 24-28 June 1996; the second in Pretoria on 23-25 September 1996; the third in San Salvador on 16-18 January 1997; and the final one in Kathmandu on 22-23 May 1997. This book contains presentations made during these four sessions by some of the world’s leading experts on small arms proliferation. The presenters included independent scholars as well as government and military officials.

The papers in the first section provide a good overview of the issue, as well as a conceptual and theoretical framework for considering policy options. The following three sections focus on regions of small arms proliferation, beginning with Central and South America, then turning to Africa and finally examining South Asia. Many of the papers in these latter sections also contain policy recommendations and raise region-specific historical and philosophical issues which must be considered. Additionally, they provide some of the most detailed case studies available on small arms flows in the these regions. Throughout the volume, authors examine both political and economic factors driving supply and demand, as well as the impact of this trade on regional stability.

Publication of the papers in this book is intended to bring the issue to a wider audience, with the hope of helping to build greater global awareness as was suggested by the participants at the workshops, and ultimately to help stem the spread of these deadly arms. Activism by non-governmental organizations and citizens around the world is needed to help governments feel the sincere urgency of this threat to humanity in many parts of the world. Increased public concern, as expressed to governments, will allow more far-reaching measures be taken in a timely manner.

Meanwhile, the United Nations not only continues—but has expanded—its efforts to combat this threat. In December 1997, the General Assembly overwhelmingly endorsed the small arms panel's report, with 156 countries voting for it, six countries abstaining and none voting against it. At that time, the General Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to report back in 1999 on how the recommendations were being implemented, and on further actions to be taken. To undertake this task, a new and expanded governmental group on small arms was empanelled in May 1998, with members from 23 states. This group will hold three meetings in 1998-99 and submit a report to the Secretary General, and through him to the General Assembly, in 1999.

Editorial Note

The papers collected in this volume were originally prepared for four workshops organised by the UN Department for Disarmament Affairs to inform the work of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms. These workshops were held during 1995-96. Some of the authors updated their papers for publication in early 1998; others did not. Lora Lumpe, senior fellow with the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers in Oslo, and Tamar Gabelnick, Acting Director of the Arms Sales Monitoring Project at the Federation of American Scientists in Washington, DC edited the presentations for this book.

All views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the United Nations or the Department for Disarmament Affairs.