

Introduction

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In a few short years, the number of national, regional and international initiatives on light weapons has grown dramatically.¹ Today, organisations ranging from the UN to local community groups are involved in finding solutions to the prevalence of weapons in societies, as well as to their negative potential for increasing the lethality in existing areas of violence.

Not a new problem, the proliferation of light weapons is, however, one that has only recently moved to the forefront of international security issues. Combatants in wars fought during the Cold War were recipients of vast quantities of rifles, pistols, mortars and explosives among other war *matériel*. In Central America and Africa, the remnants of these wars remain – weapons spreading from the original conflict area to new locations and new conflicts. In addition to the diffusion of weapons already in these regions, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and with it the breakdown of controls over state-owned weaponry, saw huge numbers of weapons – from fighter planes to assault rifles – being sold at low prices to buyers from around the world. The sheer volume of the weaponry in circulation has prompted a response that focuses both on the suppliers of weapons and on ways of managing those already in circulation that is known within the UN as ‘practical disarmament’. In parallel with these efforts, studies are being made of ways to improve the regulation of firearms; the impact of firearms on communities; and programmes to assist post-conflict countries in providing for the safety of their citizens and reversing emerging cultures of violence.

But controlling light weapons is complex. Unlike other weapons, such as biological, chemical and nuclear, where an international norm against their use has developed, light weapons have a legitimate function within state structures. Consequently, the norms that are being developed relate to the misuse and abuse of these weapons. This is most clearly illustrated in the signing of the Ottawa Treaty to ban anti-personnel landmines. The realisation that the human cost was greater than the military utility of these mines has led many countries to ban their production and export. With the conclusion of the ban on landmines, people are now beginning to look at

creating a campaign to ban small arms. During the so-called ‘Ottawa Process’, one point was clearly highlighted: the shift experienced by many countries who see landmines no longer from a security perspective, but a humanitarian one. It is this broader thinking, involving the incorporation of a wider array of actors, that is necessary for carrying forward the current initiatives on small arms and light weapons. In the first instance, the issues that make for the small arms problem are related not only to traditional security concerns but also to socio-economic and developmental processes. Thus, the small arms issue touches upon a multitude of other processes, such as governance, peace, reconciliation, human security, economics, crime and survival. Secondly, small arms have to do both with state and non-state actors. The complexity of the small arms scourge is, therefore, so vast that it will be difficult to generate a single international initiative that will mobilise all others for the resolution of the problem. In fact, it is possible to state that the reason so many regional initiatives and positions are emerging on these issues is precisely that the only possible controls will have to be micro-managed within each sub-region, according to that region’s priorities, and that these might not always coincide region to region. In the simultaneity and co-ordination of sub-regional initiatives, therefore, a working solution to the uncontrolled proliferation of arms might be found. It is in this light that we must look at the problem of small arms proliferation in Africa. This is why an initial investigation of one sub-region in particular – Southern Africa – is of importance for putting the whole in perspective.

This volume proposes to show a number of recent international and regional approaches taken by organisations to make the curbing of small arms proliferation conceivable within their frames of reference. At the same time, it acknowledges that Africa has not yet decided to enter a special programme, nor undertaken an initiative that prioritises the need to contain and control small arms proliferation. Nevertheless, since Africa cannot afford to be out of synchronisation with other international initiatives that are emerging in this respect, the volume also offers an insight into the status and structures of existing regional and sub-regional organisations that could conceivably lead the way in future African initiatives to put a stop to the flow of small arms in the region.

In Chapter 1, a review of international initiatives related to small arms is undertaken, followed by a closer look at both the efforts of the UN at small

arms control in Chapter 3, as well as the recent convention signed by members of the OAS on illicit firearms trafficking (Chapter 4). In Chapter 5, the structures of the OAU and the type of areas in which they might play a leading role in future efforts to stop weapons flows are explored. Chapter 6 details the structures and mandates for action at sub-regional level of the SADC and regional sub-groupings, namely the ISDSC and SARPCCO. Interspersed are Chapter 2, on how to find points of leverage and areas for action in the international agenda on small arms, together with a background piece on the availability of weapons in Southern Africa, and Chapter 7 on developing an early warning system for light weapons flows.

One specific region – Southern Africa – is focused on in the present volume. It looks not only at the interpretation of the regional views and needs in respect to light weapons proliferation, but also at existing mechanisms for joint action that can be enhanced to accommodate the issue of arms control. The volume outlines in detail the three mechanisms that could be enhanced and utilised to this effect; namely the OAU, SADC and SARPCCO. It is now time to reflect on and summarise the potential of the Southern African region for action and to provide specific regional recommendations that could be made workable by implementing the formula of engagement mentioned above, albeit at a sub-regional level.

The Problem

Southern Africa is a good example of how weapons can spread through an area. As has been said elsewhere in this volume: “*With the resolution of conflicts in Namibia and Mozambique, the election of a new government in South Africa and the continuing ... peace process in Angola, it is a time for optimism about the future of the region.*”² Yet, as is pointed out, the effects of weapons being sold, bartered or smuggled from Mozambique and Angola are being felt in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe.³

There is no accurate measure of the number of weapons circulating in the region. In Mozambique alone, the estimates of weapons imported during the civil war range from 0,5 million to six million. During the UN peacekeeping operation (ONUMOZ 1993-1995), nearly 190 000 weapons were collected.

Most were not destroyed, however, and soon they were again on the streets of Maputo, or being moved into neighbouring states. In South Africa, in addition to the 4,1 million firearms licensed to civilians (i.e., excluding weapons in the possession of the security forces), the estimates of illegal weapons range from 400 000 to eight million.

In Angola, it is virtually impossible to estimate the number of weapons. It was reported that in 1992, following the renewal of fierce fighting, 700 000 were distributed to civilians by the government. During the demobilisation component of the most recent UN peacekeeping operation (UNAVEM III) only 34 425 weapons were collected, many of which were old and unserviceable. This, combined with the low number of police and soldiers who have been demobilised, indicates that most soldiers and weapons are being kept out of the peace process. If Angola follows Mozambique's example, once there is a firm peace and people get rid of their weapons, either from necessity or need, its impact on countries in the region could be at least as severe as that effected by Mozambique.

In South Africa, the years since 1994 have seen an upsurge in the number of weapons, illegal and legal. An average of 20 000 firearm licence applications were received each month in the period January to March 1996, of which approximately 85 per cent were approved. South Africa also has an extremely high number of lost and stolen firearms. According to the South African Minister for Safety and Security, an estimated 30 000 stolen licensed firearms enter the illegal market annually. Added to this are the approximately 8 500 weapons lost or stolen annually from the police and defence force. The presence of these illegal weapons in the hands of criminals has prompted South Africans to arm themselves, causing a spiralling increase of firearms in the country which "*may have profound implications for the stability of the republic*".⁴

Paradoxically, Southern Africa, so hopeful an area otherwise, is suffering directly from the impact of peace without disarmament. The democratic transitions in Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa, the peace process in Angola, and the end of the civil war in Mozambique have liberated vast amounts of weapons from political constraints. These are circulating faster than they can be identified, captured and destroyed. Further afield, now that the Democratic Republic of the Congo has joined SADC, the problems of the amassed weapons in that country, as a result of the civil war and the

ongoing civil unrest there, will also impact on the sub-region of Southern Africa. For the purposes of this study it helps to view the community of Southern African countries as having three distinct roles in the proliferation of small arms across SADC member states' borders: source, transit and end-user countries.

Countries where weapons originate (although they may not be the producers) are manifestly South Africa, Mozambique and Angola. Countries through which weapons primarily transit are Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Swaziland. End-user countries are predominantly Angola, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The problems associated with each group must be seen in their own light. By the same token, the impact of the increased availability of small arms among rural and urban populations of Southern Africa must be looked at in some depth.

There is little doubt that these vast, uncontrolled movements of small arms are devastating to the consolidation of peace processes, democracy and to the provision of basic human security. The situation deserves particular attention for the following reasons:

- the increase in availability of highly lethal light weapons augments the destructiveness of conflicts and adds to the refugee problem;
- many countries are experiencing an increase in violent crime that is directly traceable to the availability of weapons, coming either from stolen national stocks or produced as illicit trade;
- the increase in crime can, in turn, seriously disrupt economic, developmental and political processes in democratic and transitional governments; and
- the increase and availability of small arms and light weapons has depersonalised crime and generated a mentality of violence in the communities affected by this flow.

In the understanding that most weapons now circulating illicitly through Southern Africa were at one point licit, any recommendations for regional action to contain and reduce flows will have to look at a tightening of the licit *matériel*, as well as an improvement in the capacity to control and stop illicit flows. With this dual objective in mind, to summarise the nature and

possibilities of existing regional instruments that might lead the way in designing and implementing such a non-proliferation programme, seems entirely appropriate.

Endnotes

- 1 The report of the UN Panel of Governmental Experts (A/52/298) defines *small arms* as those designed for personal use (revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles, light machine guns); and *light weapons* as those designed for use by a crew (heavy machine guns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tanks guns, recoilless rifles, portable anti-tank missile and rocket launchers, portable anti-aircraft missile launchers and mortars of calibres less than 100 mm).
- 2 See Meek, Chapter 7, p. 98
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 C Smith 'Light Weapons and the international Arms Trade' in Small Arms Management and Peacekeeping in Southern Africa, UNIDIR, Geneva 1996, p. 41.