

*Section One:
Transition and Illegal Weapons in South Africa*

Chapter 1

*Transition and Illegal Weapons in South Africa:
An Overview*

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Introduction

The past decade has witnessed a profound change in the way in which countries interact and in the increasing interdependence between them, in and across regions. The breakdown of Cold War hostilities has seen former adversaries establish economic and political alliances. It has also seen the outbreak of wars within states and between states that were enveloped by Cold War constraints. These are the conflicts that have become increasingly visible and appear increasingly violent.

The rules of war of the past are rupturing so that children have become the combatants and civilians the victims of modern wars. Less common now are wars between disciplined troops following the *Geneva Convention*, more common are insurgent groups targeting those who are weak and vulnerable and, in the process, not only achieving their war objectives but also crippling the development of countries for years, even decades to come. The causes of these wars are many; a common factor, however, is the weapons with which they are being waged. It is not that the light weapons in use are a new type of weapon, just one that has become increasingly available. During the Cold War, light weapons, including assault rifles, hand guns, grenades and ammunition were included in much larger arms sales. Few records were kept of the numbers of light weapons transferred in this way and many are still in the regions of conflict to which they were originally supplied. More recently, the collapse of the economies of countries in

Eastern Europe has seen these countries eager to find buyers for one of their most available commodities – weapons.¹

Exacerbating the abundance of light weapons in circulation today is the number of licenses in existence for their production and the development of indigenous capacity for arms manufacturing in many developing countries. While few countries outside of North America and Europe are able to produce the full range of conventional land, sea and air weapons (aircraft, helicopters, tanks and ships), many more are producing light weapons. It is estimated that, in 1988, more than forty countries had active light weapons production facilities.² Often these light weapons have been manufactured by private companies (at least in non-communist countries). Consequently, governments have tended to exercise far less control over the sales of these than over sales of conventional weapons which were seen as posing greater threats to regional power balances.

The irony of these decades of weapons sales is that the weapons legally sold earlier have often made their way onto the illicit market. Short-sighted sales policies – arming friendly regimes that later become hostile – and a lack of control over weapons once they reach their destination, have led to the wholesale transfer of weapons from the legal to the illegal market. In West Africa, weapons purchased by Burkina Faso in the 1980s are believed to form the base of the numerous illegal weapons circulating in the region today. In this regard, Afghanistan remains the nemesis. Weapons supplied by the United States to the Mujahadeen are now unaccounted for and presumed to be on the black market. In Southern Africa as well, countries are reaping the grim reward of arming allies and being unable to regain control over the weapons supplied, once the situation has changed. South Africa, which armed factions in both Angola and Mozambique as part of its policy to prevent the expansion of communism, has been the destination for scores of weapons from both countries. Internally as well, weapons which were supplied to political parties have not been collected and caches of weapons buried before 1994 which are still fully functional are being unearthed.

These weapons, while not the cause of violence, war or conflict, are the tools used to perpetrate such acts and, consequently, their presence can destabilise already tense situations and, in certain cases and in sufficient

quantities, may hold the balance between war and peace. Weapons also impact on post-conflict development. The presence of landmines in arable fields, near wells and around power grids hampers reconstruction, not to mention maiming millions. The presence of large numbers of poorly controlled weapons can also impact on peoples' feelings of security, leading to the arming of society against armed gangs and criminals. A United Nations advisory mission to West Africa in 1995 found that the presence of weapons and their use in crime and violence was visibly affecting the development of countries in the region. In other parts of Africa, aid agencies have suspended operations due to fears of violence by armed gangs and, in South Africa, lenient firearm ownership has perpetuated a cycle of arming and rearming that will be difficult to stop.

Regional Dynamics and Illegal Weapons

A fair amount has been written on the history of weapons proliferation in Southern Africa, especially in Mozambique and Angola. The twenty years of civil war in these countries have left both shattered and, while Mozambique has begun the transition from war to peace, Angola seems unable to decide which it wants more.

During the course of these wars and the liberation struggles in Zimbabwe and South Africa, hundreds of thousands of tons of arms and ammunition have been supplied to the region. While ammunition may be used quickly, the weapons which put it to use last for years. Demobilisation and disarmament programmes carried out in Mozambique, Angola and the then Rhodesia were unable to collect the weapons in those countries and a policy of not destroying those which had been collected has led to their being recommissioned and put into use, often illegally.

A typology of countries in Southern Africa, in terms of how each is impacted by weapons proliferation, identifies three types: source, transit and end-use countries. Table 1 shows how the countries in the region fit into this diagram. It is important to note that a country may have dual roles (that is, function as both a source and transit country) or may be a source country without having domestic arms production capacity (for example, Mozambique is considered a source country because of the number of

weapons which emanate from there, but has no indigenous manufacturing ability).

Table 1 – Typology of countries in Central and Southern Africa³

SOURCE	TRANSIT	END-USE
South Africa		South Africa
Mozambique	Mozambique	
Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe	
	Namibia	
	Zambia	
		Angola
		Democratic Republic of Congo
	Malawi	
	Tanzania	
		Burundi
		Rwanda
Kenya	Kenya	
	Uganda	Uganda

This typology gives some indication of the dynamics of weapons movements in Central and Southern Africa. It is a fluid profiling, which allows countries to change from, for example, transit to end-use, or end-use to source, as the patterns of conflict shift. For example, along the borders Angola shares with Namibia and Botswana, incidents of the smuggling of weapons out of Angola coincide with decreases in armed conflict in that country.⁴ These types of patterns clearly indicate how quickly weapons can move, and how levels of demand dictate to which destination they are circulated.

Demand factors for illegal weapons can range from weapons being moved from one conflict area to another, weapons that are wanted for criminal use, weapons as a commodity to be sold and resold on black markets and, in regions which are unstable and where the state is increasingly unable to

provide for protection, weapons for personal security. Those who are involved in the illegal trade are also important factors in determining the patterns of arms proliferation. Essentially there are three categories of people who serve as the intermediaries between arms sellers and arms buyers. They are arms brokers who may work from countries outside the region in which they are facilitating arms deals; commodity traders who use weapons as another form of currency and are also involved in the smuggling of other illicit goods, including ivory, precious metals, gemstones and counterfeit currency; and criminals who buy and sell weapons for illicit activity.

Impact of Illegal Weapons on South Africa

In South Africa, the gun is increasingly being perceived as a symbol of the crime and violence gripping the country. In the three years since the elections that saw a new government take office in 1994, the enormous increase in the visibility of weapons has not gone unnoticed. It is argued that South Africa has a long history of weapons, both among the whites and the Africans, most notably the Zulus who identify closely with their traditional weapons. However, it is the glut and seemingly uncontrollable spread of these arms that raise fears for development and security. And the response by citizens perpetuates the problem, as individuals choose to buy or steal firearms for self-defence.

In South Africa and other countries, weapons are viewed more positively in certain quarters. They are seen as the means by which independence was (or in some cases still is being) won; and it is weapons that proclaim the power of people to triumph over repressive regimes. South Africa is a country inextricably bound to the history of the region and to the resulting surfeit of illegal weapons. Presenting itself as the bulwark against the spread of communism in the south, South Africa engaged in a domestic drive to gain self-sufficiency in weapons production in the 1970s-1980s, selling many of these weapons – primarily light weapons – to its allies in neighbouring countries, Renamo in Mozambique, Unita in Angola, and also engaging in resupplying captured weapons, thus putting them back into circulation. At one stage, South Africa was manufacturing the AK-74, a Soviet-design weapon used by Frelimo and the MPLA, which it distributed in the region.

The sad truth today is that South Africa, while still an important arms manufacturer in the region, has become the recipient of many illegal weapons that the former government spread throughout sub-Saharan Africa. These weapons, smuggled from Mozambique and Angola, are still functional and have been used to carry out crimes and attacks in various provinces of South Africa. A demand for other weapons has also arisen: pistols and revolvers which are smuggled through sea and air ports into South Africa from the United States, China and Eastern European countries. Some of these shipments are detected – countless others may reach the arms-thirsty market. And it is this evidently unsaturated demand for firepower that keeps the issue of firearms high on the South Africa agenda. Other countries have far greater numbers of weapons in civilian hands (the number of illicit weapons is perhaps a different story), but levels of violence – and gun-related violence – fall far below South Africa’s. Crime, violence, history – all play a crucial role in the development of the climate of insecurity that seems to be gripping citizens. Yet, firearms, as a frequent tool of both crime and violence, can be identified and government responses developed.

South Africa is not alone in facing this challenge. Among countries in West Africa, the absence of state-provided security has led to a surge of illegal weapons in civilian hands and has had the unforeseen effect of delaying needed development assistance. Nor is it only Africa, sometimes referred to as the *lost* continent, that has had to contend with these problems: Latin America, Eastern Europe, the countries of the former Soviet Union and South East Asia abound with the military remains of war, while the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the countries of Europe have all taken steps to reduce firearm-trafficking and bring certain types of weapons under increased control.

In understanding the current problem of illegal firearms in South Africa, it is important to understand some of the historical background to the situation that South Africa now faces; to focus on how both illegal and legal weapons moved into and through the country, the so-called “process of diffusion.”⁵ In the South African context, where weapons are frequently lost or stolen, both from civilians and security forces, the control of legal and illegal weapons must be considered together, and an attempt to manage one must of necessity involve the other. While the history of South Africa and its role

as a supplier of weapons to the region are important, internal and external events since the early 1990s significantly changed the number and use of weapons in South Africa.

The euphoria that gripped South Africa in 1994, in the wake of the elections, was a critical time for the changing of attitudes and perceptions; consequently, in the greater goal of working towards national reconciliation, the questions of collecting weapons and destroying caches left over from the armed resistance and forces of the homeland and TBVC states (Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei) were left too late. By the time these caches were investigated, the weapons were gone or the maps locating them lost. This delay has made the current challenge more difficult, especially in the face of high levels of violent crime.

In its defence, the government has not been idle and efforts have been made to identify, quantify and rectify the proliferation of illegal weapons. The commitment of the government may not be enough, however, as the comprehensive action necessary to regain control over illicit weapons, revise existing legislation, enforce regulations, and instil a culture of responsible firearm ownership and use may be beyond the grasp of any country.

Historical Factors in Weapons Proliferation

The history of Southern Africa deserves more attention than can be given here.⁶ As a region, it was caught up in two main matters: the intricacies of Cold War power politics, fought in Southern Africa but manipulated by the United States and the USSR; and in isolating the apartheid regime in South Africa. The complexities of who armed whom, when, have been identified to some degree by others,⁷ but the supply of weapons, easily identified as being either NATO specifications or of Soviet design, shows the maze of intrigue that was thrown up to confuse both combatants and the international community.

In 1976, the South African government released its Defence Paper that called for a 'total strategy' against communism in neighbouring countries. This policy, which continued until 1990, included the arming of resistance

movements in Mozambique and Angola, the presence of South African troops in Angola and Namibia (called South West Africa and a protectorate of South Africa until it achieved independence in 1990), and the development of a domestic arms production capability which, by 1990, was advanced enough to produce not only helicopters, fighter planes and tanks, but a full range of light weapons (of both NATO and Soviet design), ammunition, explosives and nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.⁸ Weapons for its efforts in support of Renamo and Unita were either obtained via Armscor or were those captured by the South African Defence Force (SADF) in Angola and Namibia.

Internally there was a militarisation of society, as the government's fight against the African National Congress (ANC)⁹ and the armed wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), increased and the SADF and the South African Police (SAP) countered the threat inside the country. During the 1980s successive 'states of emergency' were issued by the government – giving the SAP free rein to move into the cities and townships to make summary arrests and detain suspected political activists. The response was the shift of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and other black consciousness organisations from mobilising support to encouraging militarisation and militant responses to state repression.

The ANC's armed wing was also involved in smuggling weapons into South Africa, escalating in the 1980s and continuing until the early 1990s. Weapons, easily purchased from East European countries, were systematically smuggled into South Africa, including AK-47s, pistols, landmines and hand grenades.¹⁰ A simple method of smuggling in cars was employed, as well as a sophisticated one, in which a safari company operated as a front for MK, infiltrating weapons in an overland vehicle. It is estimated that between 1987 and 1992, with the assistance of neighbouring countries, this method brought up to 30 tons of weapons and ammunition into South Africa.¹¹ According to testimony during hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the weapons were loaded in Lusaka, Zambia and transported overland to South Africa, where the tourist-laden vehicle easily passed through the border post. Delivery points in Cape Town and Johannesburg were used and the weapons collected by MK members inside South Africa. Until 1992, MK remained involved in the project, although it appears that the arms-smuggling ceased in 1991.¹²

During this time, other means of smuggling were utilised, and weapons were cached along borders with neighbouring Swaziland, Lesotho and Mozambique.

During this same period, the South African government supplied weapons to the homelands and the TBVC states for use by their security forces, governments officials, traditional leaders and militia.¹³ It is estimated that, during the 1980s, approximately 3 000 weapons were distributed among these groups by the South African government. Most of the weapons were military automatic rifles and machine guns, which were distributed without accurate records being kept,¹⁴ making attempts at their collection in 1995 largely futile.

The South African government also engaged in supplying weapons to Inkatha, the Zulu-dominated party. In the 1990s, the government, having unbanned the ANC, undertook a concerted effort to weaken the party and block further democratisation. This was carried out in part by arming Inkatha against the ANC and training Inkatha vigilantes as hit squads and to foment violence in hostels, especially in the Johannesburg area. The Inkatha vigilantes operated under the direction of a 'third force', made up of SADF and police members who planned numerous attacks and assassinations during that time.¹⁵ The members of the third force have been implicated in the supply of weapons to Inkatha, including weapons from Namibia and Mozambique which had their serial numbers removed and were given to Inkatha members. Payment was made by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) for these weapons and ammunition.¹⁶ The IFP were supplied with weapons of Soviet design (AK-47s, for example), in addition to those used by the South African forces (R1s, R4s, R5s and G3s). The IFP is also suspected of having purchased weapons directly from Renamo in Mozambique.¹⁷ In mid-1999, prior to the second presidential election, arms caches were located and destroyed in part of KwaZulu-Natal and the Free State that were reportedly supplied to the IFP prior to the 1994 elections. It is estimated that more than 60 tons of weapons, ammunition and explosives were supplied by Commander Eugene de Kock to the IFP in 1992. Of these, the recent cache finds have brought to light only a small percentage.¹⁸

By the time of elections in 1994, South Africa had tons of weapons, ammunition and explosives within its borders scattered across the country's

nine provinces (although largely in the provinces of Gauteng, Kwazulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Western Cape), most kept in unidentified locations. The preoccupation of the newly-elected government after the elections was on reconciling former foes and cementing democratic principles in the country. The location and destruction of caches of weapons in the country were not prioritised (as has been stated above) and by the time the government responded and tried to find and destroy them, many were untraceable.

Thus by 1996 the government was having to react to weapons-smuggling from poorly guarded borders with Mozambique and Namibia (weapons which were transiting Namibia from Angola), in addition to the scores of weapons which were moving from caches within the country onto the domestic black market. The actual number of illegal weapons in the country is not known but, from observing the ease with which weapons are available to criminals, those involved in political violence and vigilante groups, it is clear that the supply is almost unlimited.¹⁹

Endnotes

- 1 See L Mathiak, *The light weapons trade at the end of the century*, in V Gamba (ed), *Society under siege: Crime, violence and illegal weapons*, Vol 1, Institute for Security Studies, Halfway House, 1997, p 84.
- 2 Ibid, p 82.
- 3 Typology developed by personnel of the Arms Management Programme at the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa.
- 4 Reuters, *Angolan cease-fire boosts South African arms smuggling*, 22 December 1994, accessed from Reuters's archive.
- 5 The concept of the diffusion of arms was developed by Michael Klare. See M Klare, *Light weapons diffusion and global violence in the post-Cold War era*, in J Singh (ed), *Light weapons and international security*, British American Security Information Council and Pugwash, New Delhi, 1995. He refers to the "process of diffusion" as being the means by which arms enter and penetrate states and societies, "extending not only to governments and state-owned entities but also to private armies and militias, insurgent groups, criminal organisations, and other non-state actors" (p 3).
- 6 See, among others, F Walsh, *South Africa: A narrative history*, Kodansha International, 1999; and M Roberts, *South Africa 1948-1994: The rise and fall of apartheid*, Longman, London, 1996.
- 7 Works which detail the proliferation of arms in the subregion include: C Smith, P Batchelor, J Potgieter (contribs), *Small arms management and peacekeeping in Southern Africa*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 1996. Specifically for South Africa, see the Truth and

- Reconciliation Commission final report, 1998 and, for a discussion on the role of weapons in conflict in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, A Jeffrey, *The Natal story – 16 years of conflict*, South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, 1997.
- 8 South Africa renounced its nuclear weapons programme in 1994 and opened its facilities to safeguard inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency. The extent of its chemical and biological weapons programme is only now coming to light, by means of testimony by Dr Wouter Basson and others to the TRC.
 - 9 Until the ANC was unbanned in South Africa in 1990, it was represented by the United Democratic Front (UDF).
 - 10 R Williams as quoted in J Cock, A sociological account of light weapons proliferation in Southern Africa, in Singh, op cit, p 102.
 - 11 S Brummer, MK's secret weapon: A bundu bashing safari tour, *Electronic Mail & Guardian*, 19 June 1997.
 - 12 Ibid.
 - 13 Network of Independent Monitors and Gun-Free South Africa, *Weapons proliferation in South Africa with a particular focus on proliferation of illegal small arms in KwaZulu-Natal*, Johannesburg, 1998, p 22.
 - 14 Ibid.
 - 15 Again, TRC hearings brought new information to light. The testimony of Eugene de Kock and others has substantiated earlier evidence found by the Goldstone Commission and others. See *Commission of Inquiry Regarding the Prevention of Public Violence and Intimidation*, Government of South Africa, 1993.
 - 16 See R Goldstone, *Interim report on criminal political violence by elements within the South African police, Kwazulu police and the IFP*, Commission of Inquiry Regarding the Prevention of Public Violence and Intimidation, Government of South Africa, Pretoria, 1994, pp 13-14, 22-23.
 - 17 Cock in Singh, op cit, p 100.
 - 18 I Powell et al, Ngcuka guns for IFP hardliners, *Mail & Guardian*, 14-20 May 1999, pp 2-3.
 - 19 See G Oosthuysen, *Small arms proliferation and control in Southern Africa*, South African Institute of International Affairs, 1996, p 22. Estimates on the number of illegal weapons have ranged from 400 000 to 8 million.