

Small arms and light weapons transfer in West Africa: a stock-taking

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West Africa has for many years been the most unstable subregion on the continent. Since 1960, of the 15 member states that make up the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), most have been through several military coups, 37 of which were successful. One causative factor for such unprecedented insurrection is the movement of small arms and light weapons (SALW) throughout the subregion. The uncontrolled movement of SALW has exacerbated conflicts and brought destruction, untold hardship, poverty and underdevelopment.

What is the magnitude of small arms proliferation in the subregion?

The conflict-ridden West African subregion is a showcase of uncontrolled SALW proliferation. Vast quantities of arms have flooded the region despite their rampant misuse by state and non-state actors alike. The widespread availability of small arms to abusive actors poses a threat of unprecedented magnitude to West Africa, far greater than that of HIV/AIDS in terms of its socio-economic and human consequences. Because of this proliferation, the fabric of the subregion itself is rapidly changing, moving toward self-destruction. This can be observed in three different areas:

- the easy availability and use of SALW is leading to tragic consequences, not only for combatants but also for civilians, who form the majority of casualties—people are losing their lives, their health, their families, their homes and their livelihoods;
- the growing illegal character of the flow of SALW in West Africa is transforming the bulk of arms transfers from a legal, accountable trade to what is better described as trafficking. What is perhaps most alarming is the number of state and non-state actors involved in the network of illegal transfers of light weaponry; and
- the most significant and far-reaching consequence of SALW proliferation, beyond the huge economic cost and social crisis, is the shift in cultural values—West African societies have been weaponized and a culture of violence now prevails in much of the subregion.

SALW are extreme tools of violence in West Africa for several reasons. Small arms are durable, highly portable, easily concealed, simple to use, extremely lethal and possess legitimate military, police and civilian uses. In West Africa, these weapons are cheap and widely available; they are also

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lightweight, and so can be used by child soldiers, who have played such a significant role in recent conflicts in West Africa.

SALW therefore remain the primary weapons of intra- and inter-communal feuds, local wars, armed insurrections, armed rebel activities and terrorism throughout the subregion. Every West African country has experienced widespread violence in which small arms featured. SALW have particularly fuelled overlapping and uncontained conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo, and the subregion is still struggling to survive ongoing conflicts in which small arms play a central and destabilizing role. Millions of West Africans have been killed or displaced as a result, and an immeasurable amount of property has been destroyed. SALW have been used to grossly violate human rights, to facilitate the practice of bad governance, to subvert constitutions, to carry out coups d'état and to create and maintain a general state of fear, insecurity and instability. They are also being employed for non-political and non-conflict-related crime and violence.

The true magnitude of the problems caused by SALW proliferation in West Africa cannot be accurately quantified, as so many of the effects are hard to measure—such as fear and want. However, there is no dispute that small arms have had a devastating effect on development, governance and everyday life for West Africans.

The porous nature of West Africa's borders plays a significant role in proliferation. Unmanned border crossing points and widespread corruption facilitate illicit trafficking in small arms. Despite the ending of many conflicts in the subregion, smuggling and the illicit trade in small arms are reported to be on the increase.

Proliferation has also been facilitated by legal means. During conflict, some states in West Africa have liberalized gun possession laws in order to stimulate civilian arming. Arms were directly distributed to paramilitary groups by governments in order to fight rebel forces during the civil wars in Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone, but legislation was also liberalized, and proved a major driver of small arms diffusion.

Finally, the fragmentation of the political and economic space in West Africa has shaped the availability and circulation of SALW. The deterioration of many West African states' capacity to enforce the rule of law has blurred the boundaries between legal and illicit markets, enabling a thriving trade in SALW. Politicians have even been known to acquire weapons from illegal dealers to arm security personnel during election season.

How do SALW arrive and circulate within West Africa?

In principle, small arms are not supposed to be flowing into West Africa, as in 1998 the members of ECOWAS pledged not to import, export or manufacture SALW.¹ This moratorium has since become a legally binding and permanent convention,² but both measures have been routinely flouted, with disastrous consequences for human rights and regional security. Contributing factors include lax arms export controls in supplier countries, subregional allies who provide cover and sometimes financing (for example Burkina Faso facilitated the supply of arms to Liberia, despite a UN embargo³), and transnational arms dealers motivated by profit to break the law. Another key factor is the ability of embargoed buyers to use misappropriated funds or trade valuable commodities, such as diamonds or timber concessions, for arms.

The Small Arms Survey notes that Nigeria has porous borders on both its land and sea edges, allowing gun smuggling from a variety of countries.⁴ Many of these weapons come from war-torn countries elsewhere in Africa. Others have found that many of the arms smuggling rings operate out

of Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria.⁵ The smugglers use speed-boats to connect to the high seas, and then ferry the arms back to shore.

Looking at the armed conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, SALW are brought into the delta from various locations. Most of the weapons—such as the Russian AK-47, the German G-3, the Belgian FN-FAL, Czech machine guns and Serbian rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs)—are supplied by illegal dealers and sellers, who are paid through the proceeds of bunkered (stolen) oil. In October 2006 the Rivers State Police Commissioner arrested Chris Ndudi Njoku, a Nigerian businessman who specialized in importing prohibited firearms into Nigeria. In his possession were G-3s, AK-47s and Beretta automatic rifles. European dealers are also involved in the trade with their Nigerian counterparts, but rarely have to face justice.⁶

On a smaller scale, weapons are brought in to West Africa by poorly paid soldiers who have served in peacekeeping missions, for example in Liberia or Sierra Leone, and who often return home with their weapons to sell them on to combatants and gun dealers.

Once in the subregion, weapons circulate in a number of ways. During an armed conflict, there is a continual circulation of arms between factions, as weapons are captured and stolen by all sides. Such sources of arms remain significant, even for insurgent groups that have secured access to an external supply of arms in the early stages of the conflict. For example, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone had all secured supply lines either prior to the outbreak of violence or early in the conflict, but nonetheless continued to obtain stocks within the conflict complex, through theft and capture.

Some of the weapons in armed groups' stockpiles are acquired during attacks on police and military armouries. Leakages from poorly constructed and insecure stockpiles are also a chronic problem in West African countries with large numbers of weapons, both during and before and after conflict. Underresourced security forces may be unable to secure stockpiles properly, and poorly paid individuals may resort to using their official weapons for criminal activities or may rent them out to others to supplement their income. SALW also circulate through the desertion of military personnel. Many of these legal weapons find their way into the illicit market.

But not all weapons are externally manufactured and sourced: artisan firearms are now being made in such profusion that they constitute a major problem across West Africa. Blacksmiths have a significant role in the manufacture and circulation of firearms in Ghana, and this trend has spread to other countries within the subregion. Made with heavy, cast iron barrels, aluminium firing mechanisms and rough wooden handles, these weapons are the pride and joy of hundreds of blacksmiths and illicit cooperatives of artisans across Ghana.

There are an estimated 75,000 illegal craft guns now circulating in Ghana, constituting the vast majority of the 125,000 unregistered weapons in the country. Around 80% of the weapons seized by the police and the Ghanaian security forces are locally manufactured.⁷ According to a governance campaigner for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Industrial weapons are getting harder and harder to get in Ghana because of the restrictions on the international arms trade and the local guns are filling the gap. They may look heavy and crude but they are no less dangerous".⁸ It is estimated that up to one-third of the 400 murders in Ghana every year are committed with a craft gun.

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At least 400 blacksmiths in southern Ghana are now serving the industry, each capable of making up to 80 guns per year. The picture is similar in other parts of West Africa: craft guns were widely used in the civil wars that killed hundreds of thousands in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and countries including Mali have been pinpointed as major manufacturing centres.

“When the war ends, the guns remain”, is a common refrain among West Africans. After conflict, small arms are recycled for use in new conflicts and crime at home, or sold to other West African countries for use in new conflicts or to prolong ongoing conflicts. The easy availability of small arms and their circulation within and across borders facilitates the formation of new armed groups and new conflicts; it also facilitates the use of untrained civilian militias, ill-disciplined fighters, and unaccountable mercenaries.

About 40% of SALW are estimated to be in civilian hands, and most countries in West Africa have outdated arms control ordinances and legislation, which date back to the colonial era: Sierra Leone has an arms control ordinance from 1955. For those few countries in a position to enforce gun control legislation, the legislation is often obsolete. Lack of effective legislation and enforcement mechanisms does not just affect the small arms problem in one country, it also affects neighbouring countries: a state with ineffective legislation enables the movement of arms, which can then flow across borders with relative ease.

In fact, SALW seem to know no borders in West Africa. Weapons are circulating at all levels—from the smuggling of individual weapons to large shipments. Recent research assessing the border threat (conducted by the author) noted the patterns of arrival and circulation of small arms within the Mano River Union (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone).⁹ Communities interviewed disclosed that during the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, particularly AK-47s, RPGs, FM light machine guns, M16 rifles, two-barrel Berettas, pistols, bazookas and mortars, increased along the Koinadugu–Kailahun axis of Sierra Leone. Some of these arms and ammunition are still being trafficked into Sierra Leone from Guinea and Liberia and vice versa. The assessment report identified the Guinea Forest and the Parrot Beak regions as the most prominent routes for trafficking arms within the Mano River Basin. The borders between West Africa’s states are long and full of footpaths, which are poorly patrolled. More than 150 illegal crossing points were identified to and from Sierra Leone and Guinea and Liberia. Over 85% of crossing points were covered by fewer than 11% of the customs, immigration and security officials identified. The Sierra Leone Border Threat Assessment Report established that smuggling of SALW can be a real threat to stability in the Mano River Basin.

In mid-2003, while conflict raged in Liberia, the government of Guinea imported mortar rounds and other ammunition from Iran. These were declared on cargo documents as “detergent” and “technical equipment”.¹⁰ From Guinea, the weapons were forwarded to allied rebels inside Liberia who had just launched two offensives on the capital, Monrovia. The rebels of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy used these weapons to fire indiscriminately on civilian areas of Monrovia.

Just as weapons are recycled from conflict to conflict in West Africa, so too are some of the fighters. There is a thriving trade in mercenaries in West Africa, aiding the circulation and proliferation of small arms in the region. Levels of youth unemployment are high and there are many able-bodied, disgruntled persons available, ready and willing to be trained and armed to fight. As the same ethnic groups live in different states, shared identity can motivate would-be mercenaries further.

The trade in mercenaries is also fuelled by the potential profits to be made in the illicit trafficking of minerals. Large groups of ex-fighters have been attracted to the mineral-rich areas of Sierra Leone and its porous borders, to the potential rewards of illicit mining and criminality. The local oil boom also facilitates proliferation, as rebel groups carry out oil bunkering to arm themselves. Much of West Africa’s mineral wealth is being diverted to aid small arms proliferation in West Africa, and, as is explained below, these arms in turn are ensuring that this diversion of resources persists, to the detriment of development.

What is the impact of SALW on West Africa?

SALW have escalated the intensity and impact of intra-state armed conflicts in West Africa. They are responsible for the majority of direct conflict deaths in West Africa as evident in the civil wars in Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and play a central role in the many thousands of indirect conflict deaths caused by loss of access to health services, forced displacement, etc. The plight of refugees must be taken into account: the lost productivity as refugees are forced to live in camps and become dependent on humanitarian aid, and the immeasurable psychological trauma. The civil war in Sierra Leone, where SALW were the main engine of violence, saw some 50,000 people killed, 30,000 had their limbs amputated, and 215,000–257,000 women were victims of sexual violence.¹¹

During conflict, the structures of SALW circulation have integrated into economic structures. SALW have an economic value to the fighters that receive them: they enable combatants to engage in predatory violence against civilian populations, stealing goods to sell on the local black market, which is the easily accessible illicit medium of transaction, for personal sustenance and enrichment. In some subregional conflicts, such “bottom-up” war economies have generated a degree of informal cooperation between the combatants of governments and insurgent forces that has sometimes included the trading of SALW. Thus in Sierra Leone, in a new form of cooperative predation, government forces would withdraw from a town, leaving SALW behind. The RUF rebels would take control, collect the arms, and extract cash from the civilian population before retreating. Government forces would then reoccupy the town, looting property that the rebels found more difficult to sell, and engage in illegal mining.¹²

SALW have been called “weapons of mass destruction” in West Africa with good reason. The availability of SALW in West Africa has long-term and widespread pernicious effects. Even when conflicts have been officially terminated, small arms have remained, illicitly, in the post-conflict zones of Liberia, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone, making it easy for fighting to recommence. Even when further combat is avoided, the easy availability of small arms means that they have become common tools of violence, used in criminal activities and ethnic and political rivalries. Armed ex-combatants may become affiliated with local gangs, warlords or militias. This enduring climate of violence has often resulted in refugees and displaced persons fearing to return home after a conflict has ended.

The insidious nature and impact of these weapons affects all aspects of society. Small arms, especially firearms, are the primary tools used to kill, threaten and intimidate civilian populations in West Africa. Small arms play a significant role in many abuses, including rape, enforced disappearances, torture, forced displacement and enforced recruitment of child soldiers. When crimes have been committed with machetes, the victims were often initially rounded up with small arms. Heavily armed individuals create an environment in which atrocities can be committed at will and with impunity. Even small numbers of small arms confer great power on those that bear them. It is estimated that more than 50% of the weapons that proliferate in Africa are used illicitly in trafficking, armed robbery, terrorism and organized crime. The proliferation of small arms has also encouraged fear in countries where the state uses small arms to quell political opposition.

In Nigeria, the country's oil-rich Delta State has seen conflict since 2003 involving well-armed militia groups motivated in part by economic interest in stolen crude oil. These groups use a range of sophisticated weapons, such as semi- and fully automatic rifles, alongside more traditional weapons to carry out deadly and paralysing attacks on oil and gas installations. They have killed scores of security officials, damaged oil facilities and infrastructure, and shut down oil production. They have also taken foreign oil workers hostage. Hundreds of people have been killed in the violence, which has also resulted in the displacement of thousands and the destruction of hundreds of properties.

Just as the movement of fighters ready to bear arms aids proliferation, it is a result of small arms proliferation, as their supply creates the demand for people to bear arms. Equally, SALW fuel the illicit trafficking of natural resources such as oil, diamonds, timber and coffee. This is in part due to the porous nature of the borders in West Africa, which exposes the countries to a number of interrelated threats, including smuggling, robbery, dissident activities, rebellion and cross-border raids. All of these are facilitated by the possession and use of small arms. Unless integrated subregional initiatives are taken to address cross-border crimes, the problem will remain a constant threat to border communities.

Therefore, as small arms remain—and proliferate—development is impeded. The impact of SALW on economic well-being and national development in West Africa is of vast significance.¹³ Most victims of small arms violence in West Africa are young men, who have the highest earning potential. Non-fatal injuries, which are far more numerous than deaths, involve both costs to productivity and the expenses of health care. These costs must in most cases be met by individuals, households and their communities.

Women's burden of income generation and care giving has increased substantially with the death or injury of so many men. SALW have also placed women and girls at increased risk of severe injury or death. Levels of abuse and domestic violence have increased in post-conflict West African societies, as ex-combatants return home with arms, and these small arms are used to carry out sex crimes.

The presence of small arms creates an atmosphere of fear that affects the resumption of normal economic activity and everyday life. It prevents people from conducting business, leading to reduced trade and foreign investment: small arms violence, be it crime- or conflict-related, has had a particularly significant impact on tourism in West Africa.

It also affects public services: the proliferation of small arms within the subregion has inhibited access to basic services and key infrastructure, such as health clinics, schools and markets. There is a strong correlation between small arms violence and deteriorating public services in the subregion. Government services and aid programmes have to be curtailed or withdrawn because of insecurity. Levels of school enrolment and literacy have declined, as have immunizations, while child and maternal mortality have increased. Over time, this has represented a huge cumulative loss in productivity and wealth.

Over the last decade, the links between SALW proliferation, conflict, security and development have become better recognized and understood within the subregion. It is now accepted that sustainable development is seriously threatened by recurrent violent armed conflict. The proliferation of small arms has erased decades of development and progress; indeed, it has further entrenched poverty within West Africa. The interdependence of small arms control, security and development speaks to the core development mandates of poverty eradication, enhanced human security, inclusion and governance. Communities affected by small arms violence have become socially and economically marginalized. This has all grossly undermined progress toward West Africa meeting the targets of the Millennium Development Goals. It is clear that West Africa desperately needs the rapid ratification and comprehensive implementation of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms.

Notes

1. Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Light Weapons in ECOWAS Member States, signed 31 October 1998 at Abuja.
2. ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials, signed at Abuja, 14 June 2006. The convention will enter force when it has been ratified by nine member states.
3. Peter Takirambudde, "Liberia: Where the Arms Come from", *International Herald Tribune*, 17 September 2003.

4. N. Florquin and E.G. Berman (eds), 2005, *Armed and Aimless: Armed Groups, Guns, and Human Security in the ECOWAS Region*, Geneva, Small Arms Survey.
5. "Nigeria: Widespread Availability of Small Arms a Major Security Issue", IRIN, 9 May 2006.
6. *This Day*, 18 February 2003.
7. "'Craft Guns' Fuel West Africa Crime Epidemic", *The Independent*, 8 July 2008.
8. Ibid.
9. F.L. Keili, 2005, *The Sierra Leone Border Threat Assessment Report*, Government of Sierra Leone and UNDP Arms for Development Programme.
10. *Small Arms and Conflict in West Africa*, Testimony of Lisa Nicol, Human Rights Watch Researcher, before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, 20 May 2004, at <hrw.org/english/docs/2004/05/20/africa8680.htm>.
11. Ploughshares, 2002, *Armed Conflicts Report: Sierra Leone*, at <www.ploughshares.ca/libraries/ACRText/ACR-SierraLeone.html>.
12. David Keen, 2001, "Sierra Leone: War and Its Functions", in F. Stewart et al., *War and Underdevelopment. Volume 2: Country Experiences*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 169.
13. For more on the link between poverty and armed violence, see Department for International Development, 2003, *Tackling Poverty by Reducing Armed Violence: Recommendations from a Wilton Park Workshop*.

