



COMMISSION ON CRIME PREVENTION AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMITTEE

The United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) is one of the governing bodies that make up the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). CCPCJ has 40 member states that draft resolutions in an effort to prevent and combat international crime. The policies developed by CCPCJ are put into effect by the Centre for International Crime Prevention.

The CCPCJ mandate calls for international cooperation to fight national and transnational crime. The commission focuses on promoting the rule of law in order to reduce crime and violence and improve the efficiency and fairness of countries' criminal justice systems.¹

TOPIC: THE ILLICIT TRADE OF SMALL ARMS & LIGHT WEAPONS

INTRODUCTION

Small arms (such as rifles and machine guns) and **light weapons** (such as heavy machine guns and shoulder-fired missiles) are widely used by many different groups—from militaries to gangs to terrorist organizations. These types of **arms** kill at least 500,000 people each year. Small arms and light weapons have caused more deaths since World War II than any other types of weapon in part because they are easily traded across borders and because are produced in many parts of the world. Of the four million war-related deaths in the 1990s, 90 percent were **civilians** and over 80 percent were women and children, mostly due to the misuse of small arms and light weapons.²

International awareness of the problem has increased due to the threat of terrorism and conflicts in Africa and the Middle East. But the UN must address the spread of these weapons with concrete measures. As more weapons are allowed to move around the world, more conflicts will continue and more civilians will die. The General Assembly must decide upon ways to limit the sale and trade of these weapons and to disarm people who use them illegally.

BACKGROUND

Small arms and light weapons are easy to obtain for several reasons. First, technology such as cell phones and the Internet allows people to easily conduct business around the world. Even



small rebel groups in remote areas can buy weapons from people in Europe, Asia or the Americas.

Small arms and light weapons are also traded by governments and private armies, rebels, criminals and others. Often, countries buy and sell these weapons legally. But even these legal weapons can enter the **black market** if a government intentionally sells them to criminal or rebel groups, or if they are stolen.

- Estimates put the total of small arms and light weapons in the world at more than 500 million.
- Between 40 and 60 percent of those arms have been acquired illegally.
- Of the 49 major conflicts fought during the 1990s, small arms were the weapons of choice in 46.

Source: "Press Kit," UN Conference on the Illicit Trade of Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects, July 2001, <http://disarmament2.un.org/cab/smallarms/presskit.htm>.

The black market, through which products are bought and sold illegally, is an essential part of the illegal trade of small arms and light weapons. Through this worldwide market, groups can purchase weapons from dealers in almost any country. In some places, an AK-47 rifle can be bought for as little as \$15 or even traded for other goods. For example, in countries located in the Horn of Africa (such as Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya), an American AK-47 can be sold for three cows, and an M-16 for five cows.³

When rebels acquire small arms, they become difficult to stop. Fatalities increase in conflict areas and international groups have to spend more on providing medical care and refugee aid. Meanwhile, the warring groups frequently turn to other illegal activities, such as trading in illegal diamonds or drugs, in order to purchase more weapons.⁴

CRITICAL THINKING

If suppliers sell weapons to rebel groups or terrorists, do they bear any responsibility for the fatalities and conflicts these groups and terrorists cause? What if the suppliers are not companies or criminal organizations, but governments? Why might a government choose to sell weapons to a rebel group or militia?

Peacekeeping and Peace-building

Small arms pose great threats to UN **peacekeeping missions**. **Peacekeeping troops** have been attacked by armed rebel groups in Kosovo, East Timor, Bosnia and Sierra Leone. They have even been taken captive by these rebel groups. In Angola, for instance, the availability of small arms caused the failure of three separate UN peacekeeping operations.⁵

(However, recently, peacekeeping troops have been instrumental with disarmament programs in several post-conflict societies, such as Sierra Leone, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the



Congo and Liberia. They allow for former soldiers to get rid of their weapons and return to civilian life.⁶⁾

According to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan:

“In a world awash with small arms, a quarter of the estimated \$4 billion annual global gun trade is believed to be illicit. Small arms are easy to buy, easy to use, easy to transport and easy to conceal. Their continued proliferation exacerbates conflict, sparks refugee flows, undermines the rule of law and spawns a culture of violence and impunity. The majority of people who die directly from conflicts worldwide—tens of thousands of lives lost each year—and hundreds of daily crime-related deaths can be traced to illicit small arms and light weapons. These weapons may be small, but they cause mass destruction.”

Source: “Secretary-General’s Statement,” UN Small Arms Review Conference, June 2006, www.un.org/events/smallarms2006/pdf/arms060626anna-eng.pdf.

Fueling the Purchase of Small Arms and Light Weapons

In order to purchase small arms and light weapons, groups must first accumulate wealth. And to do so, they often resort to other illegal activities, such as drug trafficking or illegal diamond trading.

Drug trafficking, or the buying, selling and transporting of illegal drugs, is a very profitable business for many rebel groups. Groups may start trafficking drugs to make money, and purchase light weapons for protection. In these cases, drug traffickers often gain local power and use their **arsenals** to cause civil unrest. In other instances, rebel groups intent on causing political conflict may become involved in the drug trade in order to fund their violent campaigns against the government or others.

In other regions, rebel groups use the illegal diamond trade to purchase light weapons. These groups terrorize local populations in order to force civilians to mine diamonds. They sell these diamonds, called **conflict diamonds**, or “blood diamonds,” to purchase weapons and hire troops that will help them cause political upheaval.⁷

Diamond and drug trafficking networks are closely linked to small arms networks. In El Salvador, for example, where drug trafficking has been a problem since the 1970s, weapons have been recovered that originated from Vietnam, Uganda and Angola.⁸

Role of Development in the Light Weapons Trade

Light weapons play an enormous role in preventing and reversing development trends in impoverished areas. The presence of small arms, especially illegally-obtained small arms, vastly increases the ability of discontent rebel groups, terrorists or gangs to cause violent conflict or oppose government forces.

At the 2001 UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, Member States voiced their concern over the “humanitarian and socioeconomic



consequences” and the “threat to peace, reconciliation, safety, security, stability and sustainable development” caused by the light weapons trade.⁹

But problems with light weapons and small arms do not simply exaggerate developmental problems. These problems are often caused by underdevelopment, too. Lack of development in a region often impairs the ability of a military or police force to protect citizens. Health and educational services are not fully available. Underdeveloped regions often suffer from human rights abuses, economic inequality and other issues that lead to widespread dissatisfaction with the government. These areas are very vulnerable to political instability and conflict, which in turn make the illicit arms trade very appealing.

There is no single method for dealing with small arms and light weapons. A ban on these items is impossible since many countries depend upon them for their armies. But it is also clear that the number of small arms around the world is much greater than the amount needed to protect nations. So the goal is to develop ways to prevent small arms from being illegally produced or traded without sacrificing security for nations around the world.

CRITICAL THINKING

How might economic development and improvement of living conditions help to fight the illicit light weapons and small arms trade?

INTERNATIONAL ACTION

Regional Arrangements

In 1998, the Organization of American States (OAS) adopted the *Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, and Other Related Materials* in order to stop the illegal flow of weapons in the region. The convention was written to respond to the violence caused by drug cartels in North and South America.

This convention requires countries to keep records of their small arms and light weapons. It also calls upon the makers of these weapons to clearly mark their products so that they can be traced.¹⁰

But many critics point out that the OAS convention does not place limits on the legal trade of small arms—it just tries to stop the *illegal* trade. As a result, countries can legally ship weapons all over the region, and rebel groups still steal them.

The European Union (EU) also created guidelines for arms trading. It asked its member nations to draft national laws against arms trading. It also instituted a “Joint Action on the EU contribution to combating the destabilizing accumulation and spread of small arms and light weapons,” which places limits on weapons and ammunition, and has given money and resources to other nations, such as Cambodia, Albania and countries in the Caribbean, so that they can stop illegal weapons trading.¹¹



The UN and Small Arms

Many UN resolutions and groups have attempted to tackle the problem of small arms and light weapons. In fact, the UN has been confronting this issue since 1962.¹²

In 1999, a Group of Governmental Experts on Small Arms found that small arms are available because governments do not control them well. Also, in order for smaller nations to properly establish control within their borders, they need assistance from developed nations. This assistance should not only be military, but also economic and social.

This issue of small arms was also included in the *Millennium Declaration* of September 2000. United Nations member states resolved to “take concerted action to end illicit traffic in small arms and light weapons, especially by making arms transfers more **transparent** and supporting regional disarmament measures.”¹³

CRITICAL THINKING

The Millennium Declaration indicates that arms transfers need transparency. How will this help reduce the illicit arms trading?

In 2001, at the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, Member States acknowledged the “implications that poverty and underdevelopment have for the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons.”¹⁴ They recommended the improvement of development initiatives in underdeveloped countries, as an important part of stemming the illicit arms trade.

Other recent UN action includes the General Assembly’s December 2005 adoption of the *International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons*, which helps officials identify sources of illegal weapons. Secretary-General Kofi Annan called the agreement the most significant achievement of the year in the fight against the illegal small arms trade.

Also in 2005, the United Nations *Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition* came into force. The protocol is important because it is the first legally-binding way for member states to co-operate in combating the manufacture and trafficking of small arms.¹⁵

At the 2006 Small Arms Review Conference, UN Member State tried to adopt an international arms trade treaty. Opposition was voiced by Pakistan, China, India and Russia. The meeting ended without agreement on an outcome document.



RESISTANCE AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

The National Rifle Association (NRA), an NGO from the United States, voiced strong opposition to tightening countries' gun control laws. The NRA successfully lobbies for gun-ownership rights in countries where governments do not recognize a right to bear arms. "These dictatorships, terrorist states and so-called 'free' nations of the world plan to meet on our home soil to finalize a UN treaty that would strip all citizens of all nations of their right to self-protection, and strip you of your rights under the second amendment (the right to bear arms)," the NRA stated. Critics of the National Rifle Association point out that preventing the illegal trade of weapons does not prohibit legal gun ownership. But the NRA sees the right to own firearms as a human right, not a legal one—and any attempt to obstruct gun ownership is perceived as an encroachment on human rights.

Source: National Rifle Association, www.stopungunban.org.

PROGRESS TO DATE

In June and July of 2006, UN Member states met to review the progress of the Program of Action from 2001 and found that since its adoption:

- More than 50 countries have strengthened domestic legislation to control the illegal trade in small arms and over 60 countries have destroyed large amounts of weapons
- UN Country teams have carried out disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs in Cambodia, Central African Republic and Guinea Bissau
- Three legally binding agreements have been developed in Africa to specifically address the humanitarian impact illegal weapons have on that continent

Source: Background Release, *Major Review at UN to Assess Progress Made, Actions Needed to Further Stem Illegal Small Arms Trade*, June 2006,
www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2006/dc3027.doc.htm

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FORMULATING A RESOLUTION

Delegates should address the following when creating draft resolutions:

- Creating ways to identify and track small arms around the world;
- Suggesting how countries can work together to solve the problem;
- Recommending ways for countries to safely share information on the topic; and
- Recommending aid—financial and technical—for development initiatives in regions especially suffering from illicit small arms trade.



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Is your country threatened by small arms and light weapons? How?
2. Is your country involved in international efforts to control these weapons? How?
3. What international or regional agreements has your country ratified?
4. Does your country depend on small arms and light weapons for defense? If so, what steps has it taken to curb the illegal trade of these items?
5. Has your country suffered a recent war? Has your government had problems with small arms and light weapons?

TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Small arms: weapons designed for personal use, such as rifles and machine guns.

Light weapons: weapons designed for use by several persons, or a crew. These include heavy machine guns and shoulder-fired missiles.

Arms: instruments or weapons for offense or defense.

Civilian: a person who is not a member of the military.

Black market: the purchase and sale of illegal goods. Black market operations are secretive and often involve networks of criminal organizations as both suppliers and consumers of illegal materials.

Peacekeeping missions: deployment of peacekeeping troops, funded by the UN or a regional organization, for the purpose of maintaining peace in a conflict region. Peacekeeping operations can be held either during a conflict, to bring order to the area, or after conflict, to help maintain order during recovery.

Peacekeeping troops: members of a military force who are assigned to maintain or establish peace in a conflict area. The UN's peacekeeping troops are usually soldiers, police or civilians who are provided by member states to a particular UN mission.

Arsenal: a collection of weapons

Conflict diamonds: diamonds that are used to fund militias or rebel groups. They are often mined by local residents who are forced to work under harsh and inhumane conditions. In turn, these diamonds are sold, and the money gained is used to take military action against a government.

Transparency: when practices and policies are made clear and information is available to the public.



SOURCES FOR RESEARCH

UN Department for Disarmament Affairs <http://disarmament.un.org>

UN Institute for Disarmament Research www.unidir.org

UN Small Arms Review Conference www.un.org/smallarms2006

Federation of American Scientists www.fas.org



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- ¹³ “United Nations Press Kit - UN Conference on the Illicit Trade of Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects.”
- ¹⁴ “Report of the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects,” http://disarmament.un.org/cab/smallarms/files/aconf192_15.pdf
- ¹⁵ “Major Review at United Nations to Assess Progress Made, Actions Needed to Further Stem Illegal Small Arms Trade.”

