

# The New Business of War: Small Arms and the Proliferation of Conflict

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In his “We the Peoples” report issued in conjunction with the September 2000 United Nations Millennium Summit, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan advocated a re-energized worldwide effort to prevent war by promoting democracy, human rights, and “balanced economic development”—and by curbing “illicit transfers of weapons, money, or natural resources” that help fuel ethnic and territorial conflicts.<sup>1</sup>

There’s plenty of work to do. As of late 1999, at the end of the most violent century in human history, there were forty armed conflicts under way in thirty-six different countries.<sup>2</sup> The international community has yet to develop reliable mechanisms to thwart the kinds of genocidal attacks that killed 800,000 Rwandans in the mid-1990s, nor has it created a capability for coping with complex, multisided civil wars like the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).<sup>3</sup> And there is troubling evidence to suggest that in many of the world’s most intractable conflicts, waging war has become a way of life—a way to generate income, a way to exert political power, and a way to provide “employment” to young people, many no more than children, who have little prospect of securing a decent education or a steady job.<sup>4</sup>

This trend toward global “warlordism” is an incendiary mixture of feudalism and turbo-charged twenty-first-century capitalism. Unless we find a way to curb this new form of warfare, the fragile progress that has been achieved in the past century in promoting democracy and human rights and expanding educational and economic opportunities for a significant share of the world’s population could go up in flames, not in an all-consuming nuclear confrontation—as was feared during the Cold War—but through the systematic proliferation of “small wars.”

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<sup>1</sup> Kofi A. Annan, “*We the Peoples*”: *The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century*, available at [www.un.org/millennium/sg/report](http://www.un.org/millennium/sg/report), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ernie Regehr, “Introduction,” *Armed Conflicts Report 2000* (Waterloo, Canada: Project Ploughshares, 2000), available at [www.ploughshares.ca/content/ACR/ACR00-Introduction.html](http://www.ploughshares.ca/content/ACR/ACR00-Introduction.html); Michael Renner, “Ending Violent Conflict,” *State of the World 1999: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> William D. Hartung and Bridget Moix, “Cold War Legacies,” *Focus on Africa* (April/June 2000); available at [www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/focus](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/focus).

<sup>4</sup> Paul Collier, *Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and Their Implications for Policy* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, June 15, 2000), pp. 15–28.

The weapons of choice in these new conflicts are not big-ticket items like long-range missiles, tanks, and fighter planes, but small and frighteningly accessible weapons ranging from handguns, carbines, and assault rifles on up to machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, light mortars, and shoulder-fired missiles.<sup>5</sup>

Because they are cheap, accessible, durable, and lightweight, small arms have been a primary factor in the transformation of warfare from a series of relatively well-defined battles between “two opposing forces wearing uniforms” to a much more volatile, anarchic form of violence. Most modern wars do not pit one government military force against another, or even one government force against one rebel movement. More often than not, today’s wars are multisided affairs in which militias, gangs, and self-anointed “rebels” engage in campaigns of calculated terror, civilian targets are fair game, and the laws of war are routinely ignored.<sup>6</sup>

The qualitative change in the character of warfare occasioned by the flood of small arms available in regions of tension has been observed first-hand by providers of medical and humanitarian relief who serve on the front lines of the world’s war zones. In a recent report on the small arms problem, the International Committee of the Red Cross has noted that “the proliferation of weapons in the hands of new and often undisciplined actors has outpaced efforts to ensure compliance with the basic rules of warfare,” resulting in “appalling levels of wanton violence and a stream of horrific images which threaten to immunize the public and decision makers to ongoing violations of international humanitarian law.”<sup>7</sup>

The chaos of contemporary conflict can be traced in part to larger geopolitical factors like the collapse of the Soviet empire and the inability of many so-called failed states to adapt to the harsh and unpredictable economic and political realities of the post-Cold War world. But the ready availability of small arms makes these conflicts far more likely to occur, far more deadly once they start, and far more difficult to resolve once the death tolls mount and the urge for revenge takes hold. When an army composed largely of ten- to fourteen-year-old children armed with automatic rifles that can fire 600 to 700 rounds per minute is set loose on the civilian population, as has occurred in places like Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Afghanistan, the results can be devastating, both in terms of loss of life and in the lingering trauma that is visited

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<sup>5</sup> For more detailed definitions of small arms and light weaponry, see Swadesh Rana, *Small Arms and Intra-State Conflicts* (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 1995), pp. 2–3; and Jeffrey Boutwell, Michael T. Klare, and Laura W. Reed, eds., *Lethal Commerce: The Global Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1995), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> George Musser and Sasha Nemecek, “Waging a New Kind of War,” *Scientific American*, June 2000, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, *Arms Availability and the Situation of Civilians in Armed Conflict* (Geneva, June 1999), p. 8.

upon the social fabric of the society that has been subjected to this grisly new form of mass slaughter.<sup>8</sup>

Another driving force behind the new wave of conflicts that have erupted in all corners of the globe, from Kosovo to Kashmir and from the DRC to Colombia, is what William Reno has aptly described as the “business of war.” Reno coined this term in the early 1990s to describe the phenomenon in which waging war is no longer merely a means to an end, but an end in itself: a way to control territory, plunder resources, and, most important of all, wield power.

Current Liberian President Charles Taylor is a prototype of the new-wave warrior. As Jeffrey Boutwell and Michael Klare have pointed out, Taylor’s rise to power began on Christmas eve, 1989, when he invaded Liberia with “100 irregular soldiers armed primarily with AK-47 rifles.” They further note that “within months, he had seized mineral and timber resources and used the profits to purchase additional light weapons.”<sup>9</sup> In essence, Taylor stumbled upon a new post-Cold War model of “rebellion,” a form of irregular warfare that can be sustained without a big-power patron and frequently without the support of the majority of the people in the target nation. As Commany Wesseh, a Liberian democracy activist who recently fled the country after an attempt was made on his life, observed at a January 2001 forum at the United Nations, wars in Africa used to be fought over ideas, but now adversaries, more often than not, are bandits and criminal gangs posing as rebels.<sup>10</sup>

This pattern of “war as plunder” has been repeated with local variations in Sierra Leone, where the Liberian-backed Revolutionary United Front (RUF) has used diamond sales to fuel its campaign of terror; in Colombia, where government forces, right-wing paramilitaries, and anti-government rebels have all skimmed off profits, fees, and bribes from the coca trade; in Angola, where Jonas Savimbi’s UNITA rebel forces have raised billions of dollars through diamond sales and the Angolan government has countered by stocking its arsenal with revenues drawn from its large offshore oil deposits; and, last but not least, in the DRC, where governments, rebels, and militia forces on both sides of the conflict have been auctioning off the nation’s rich min-

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<sup>8</sup> On child soldiers, see Neil G. Boothby and Christine M. Knudsen, “Children of the Gun,” *Scientific American*, June 2000, pp. 60–65; on the trauma caused by “small wars,” see Richard F. Mollica, “Invisible Wounds,” *Scientific American*, June 2000, pp. 54–57.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Boutwell and Michael T. Klare, “A Scourge of Small Arms,” *Scientific American*, June 2000, pp. 48–53; the reference to Taylor is on p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Commany Wesseh, “Small Arms Are a Big Problem” (speech at forum cosponsored by the Hague Appeal for Peace, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, the World Conference on Religion and Peace, and the World Policy Institute, UN Headquarters in New York, January 9, 2001).

eral resources as a way to finance their ongoing participation in the conflict and line the pockets of key military and political leaders in the process.<sup>11</sup>

The major suppliers of small arms and light weaponry—a trade that consumes an estimated \$10 billion of the world’s \$850 billion per year in military expenditures—include about a dozen governments who dominate the legal trade and untold numbers of independent dealers, brokers, and middlemen who control the illicit trade. Major government suppliers include the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom—along with key niche suppliers such as Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Germany, Israel, Italy, and South Africa.<sup>12</sup>

Governments are important players in the global market for small arms and light weapons, but the most damaging sales—including the bulk of the weapons fueling the current conflicts in Sierra Leone and the DRC—are carried out by shadowy arms brokers like Victor Bout. A recent report on UN sanctions on Jonas Savimbi’s UNITA rebel forces in Angola provides a fascinating thumbnail sketch of Bout’s arms-trading empire. Victor Bout, who uses numerous aliases, was born in Tajikistan, but currently operates out of the United Arab Emirates. Until recently he was using a fleet of more than four dozen Liberian-registered aircraft to ship surplus weapons from Bulgaria, Romania, and the Ukraine into Sierra Leone and the DRC, leaving a trail of false end-user documents and paid-off customs officials at every step of the way. The activities of Bout and the scores of other arms merchants like him depend upon the collaboration, acquiescence, or downright incompetence of governments, and upon the operations of a relatively open, unregulated global system of transportation and finance in which moving goods and money quickly with few questions asked is the order of the day. Shutting down the illicit arms trade—or even slowing it down—will, at a minimum, involve reregulating certain aspects of our global financial and trading systems to make it harder for freelance arms merchants like Victor Bout to operate.<sup>13</sup>

In response to the growing call for “global gun control” to curb the rate and intensity of global violence, arms control skeptics have been quick to put forward an international version of the National Rifle Association’s well-worn slogan that “guns don’t kill people, people kill people.”<sup>14</sup> This argument ignores the fact that in our current

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<sup>11</sup> For the best analysis to date of the dynamics of the business of war, see William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Boutwell and Klare, “A Scourge of Small Arms,” pp. 49–50.

<sup>13</sup> For detailed documentation of the activities of Viktor Bout and some proposals for regulating illicit arms traders, see UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Monitoring Mechanism on Angola Sanctions*, UN Document S/2000/1225, December 21, 2000, pp. 11–20, 30–38, and 50–61.

<sup>14</sup> In fact, the National Rifle Association is devoting substantial resources to lobbying against measures to stem the flow of small arms at the national, regional, or international levels. See Natalie Goldring, “The NRA Goes Global,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (January/February 1999), pp. 61–65.

predicament, small arms are not merely a neutral instrument, to be used for aggression or self-defense depending upon the character of the user. Guns alone don't kill people, but societies awash in guns are far more likely to resolve their differences violently, in ways that can quickly spiral out of control. Once this happens, the international community can neither stop the killing nor heal the societal wounds inflicted by militias, warlords, criminal gangs, or repressive governments. The current massive quantities of small arms in circulation have been primary contributors to what analyst Klare has described as a worldwide "epidemic of ethnic, sectarian, and criminal violence."<sup>15</sup>

What is to be done? Is the arms trade just an unfortunate, necessary evil of our interconnected world, or can effective steps be taken to rein it in and diminish the levels of violence associated with the spread of small arms and light weapons? Like any public health epidemic, the current outbreak of local and regional violence must be addressed in a comprehensive fashion, involving both preventive measures such as arms control and conflict resolution, and "treatment" in the form of diplomacy, peacekeeping, and post-conflict reconstruction. So far, the international community has invested far more in ad hoc, emergency treatment measures after violence has erupted in a given nation or region than it has in preventive approaches such as controlling access to small arms on the part of potential combatants.

Because they are cheap, plentiful, portable, and easy to maintain, small arms facilitate violations of human rights and humanitarian law by a much wider range of state and nonstate actors than major conventional systems such as fighter planes or attack helicopters, which can generally only be purchased and maintained by governmental forces that, in theory, are more amenable to appeals to national and international law. This is not to suggest that major conventional systems should be "skipped over" in discussions of reining in the international arms trade. Turkey's use of U.S.-supplied helicopters and fighter planes to bomb and burn Kurdish villages in southeastern Turkey or Ethiopia's purchase of MiG fighter jets for use in its recent border war with Eritrea are just two recent examples that suggest the wisdom of seeking comprehensive controls on the arms trade, including everything from Kalashnikovs and M-16 rifles to MiGs and F-16 fighter planes. In a recent critique of U.S. arms-transfer policy, former Costa Rican president and Nobel Peace Prize winner Oscar Arias noted that in the modern era, "the true weapons of mass destruction are the jet fighters, tanks, machine guns, and other military exports the United States ships to nondemocratic countries."<sup>16</sup>

While an across-the-board focus on limiting arms transfers makes the most sense, an argument can nonetheless be made for giving priority in terms of resources and public attention to small arms, for the simple reason that they are the primary

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Klare, "The Kalashnikov Age," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (January/February 1999), p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Oscar Arias, "Stopping America's Most Lethal Exports," *New York Times*, June 23, 1999.

instruments of violence in the vast majority of the world's most intractable conflicts. According to an assessment by Klare, light weapons were the only armaments used in forty-six of forty-nine major conflicts that were fought worldwide during the decade of the 1990s. Small arms have also been linked to the vast increase in the proportion of civilian deaths generated by today's wars. Civilian noncombatants account for an estimated 80 to 90 percent of the parties killed in current conflicts, compared with the roughly 5 percent rate of civilian deaths that prevailed during World War I.<sup>17</sup> And, noting the substantial increases in the numbers of internal refugees generated by today's wars compared with those of a generation ago, many analysts have suggested that the single most important factor explaining the upsurge in refugee populations is the ready availability of small arms.

In short, a multifaceted case can be made for the urgent need to restrict the availability of small arms, in the interests of preventing conflict and promoting stability in war-torn regions, reducing the human and economic costs of local and regional conflicts, and protecting the fragile fabric of global ethics and international humanitarian law from being overrun by an epidemic of lawlessness and violence. Toward that end, in May 1999 a coalition of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with human rights, humanitarian aid, arms control, law enforcement, and public health formed the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), with the goal of stemming the excessive accumulation, rapid proliferation, and rampant misuse of small arms.<sup>18</sup> In the past two years, IANSA has made significant strides in placing the small arms problem on the agenda of governments, international institutions, and global civil society. The question now is how to move from compassionate rhetoric to effective action.

### ***The Small Arms Conundrum: Progress and Problems***

Responding in part to pressure from NGOs and interested member states and in part to the impact of light weapons on its own operations in the field of peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, and development, the UN has been grappling with the small arms issue since 1994, when then-secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali dispatched a fact-finding mission to West Africa at the request of the president of Mali. The West Africa mission galvanized interest in the problem of small arms proliferation at the UN, leading Boutros-Ghali to coin the term "micro-disarmament," which he defined as "practical disarmament in the context of the conflicts the UN is actually dealing

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<sup>17</sup> Klare, "The Kalashnikov Age," pp. 20–21.

<sup>18</sup> International Action Network on Small Arms, (IANSA) Founding Document 6, May 1999; available at [www.iansa.org](http://www.iansa.org).

with and of the weapons, most of them light weapons, that are actually killing people in the hundreds of thousands.”<sup>19</sup> In the short time that the small arms problem has been on the international agenda, several important initiatives have been launched.

In March 1998 the Organization of American States (OAS) issued the Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Related Materials.<sup>20</sup> Although the title of the OAS convention refers to illicit trading in small arms, its provisions could have a salutary effect on the larger problem of light weapons proliferation. The accord establishes a commitment on the part of signatory states to tighten up their national laws with respect to the licensing and transfer of small arms and to make provisions for marking and tracing weapons and limiting third-party transfers (passing on weapons received from one nation to another nation or nonstate actor). If these commitments were faithfully implemented throughout the Western Hemisphere, they would have a strong, measurable impact on limiting the flow of small arms, both to criminal groups and to combatants in civil conflicts.

In response to the ready availability of small arms and the devastating impact of civil conflicts in West Africa, in December 1998 the Economic Community of West African States (ECOMOG) issued its Declaration of a Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation, and Manufacture of Small Arms and Light Weapons in West Africa, the first such effort to limit the spread of these weapons in a clearly defined geographic area.<sup>21</sup> Given the recent history of violent conflict in the region—in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Nigeria, to name just the most prominent examples—and recent revelations of the involvement of military officials and even some heads of state in illicit weapons trading, there is obviously much to be done to establish the preconditions necessary for successfully implementing the small arms moratorium in West Africa. But the declaration marks an important milestone in its own right. It is now up to the international community to find the resources and the political resolve to help put this important statement of principles into practice.

In keeping with the seriousness with which the UN treats the spread of small arms and light weaponry to conflict zones, it has organized its first-ever conference of member states on the subject, entitled “Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects,” set for July 2001. This new level of UN engagement with the small arms problem has been marked by conflicts over fundamental issues of procedure—

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<sup>19</sup> For the Boutros-Ghali quote and an excellent chronology of UN statements and activities on the small arms issue, see David Biggs, “United Nations Contribution to the Process,” in the special issue, “Small Arms Control: The Need for Coordination,” *Disarmament Forum 2* (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

such as the degree of access and input NGOs will have to UN deliberations on these matters—and by lively disputes over what the ultimate goals of UN action on the small arms problem should be.

Should the UN narrowly target “illicit” flows of small arms through beefed-up law enforcement and transparency measures? Or should it take a broader perspective that encompasses the proliferation of small arms and light weaponry regardless of the legal status of the transfers in question? Is the small arms trade primarily an arms control problem, or should the world body and its key member states tackle the underlying political, economic, and security factors driving the ubiquitous “small wars” that are being fueled by light weaponry? These questions will be hotly debated in the months and years to come, as well they should be.<sup>22</sup>

A central issue to be addressed by all parties interested in the small arms problem is determining what precisely constitutes an “illicit” transfer. A subsidiary question is whether the “legal” (that is, government-sanctioned) trade in small arms is not also a source of dangerous proliferation that needs to be restrained if there is to be any practical progress in limiting access to these deadly weapons. Emanuela-Chiara Gillard has noted in a pathbreaking legal analysis of the small arms issue that, from the point of view of the major players in the international system, illicit arms transfers are often narrowly defined as “those that occur outside the control, or against the wishes, of exporting states.”<sup>23</sup> This narrow definition of “illicit” transfers, and the determination of key UN member states to exclude consideration of anything *but* illicit transfers at the forthcoming international conference on this matter, runs the risk of letting major governments off the hook for their own reckless behavior in the arms-trading arena. For example, during the 1980s, under the guise of arming anti-communist “freedom fighters” in Angola, Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Nicaragua, the Reagan administration transferred billions of dollars in light weaponry to ragtag, right-wing rebel movements in Central America, South Asia, and southern Africa. These were covert arms sales, conducted without the approval of the American public or the vast majority of members of Congress, much less the recognized governments that these rebel groups were attempting to overthrow. These covert arms sales—which were viewed as a legitimate expression of U.S. national security interests within the Reagan administration, if not in the court of international public opinion—have since served as a seedbed for the proliferation of small arms to a motley crew of terrorists, separatists, and militia leaders and fueled conflicts from Kashmir and

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<sup>22</sup> For a thoughtful consideration of the challenges facing the UN small arms conference, see Chris Smith, “The 2001 Conference—Breaking Out of the Arms Control Framework,” in *Disarmament Forum 2*, (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2000), pp. 39–45.

<sup>23</sup> Emanuela-Chiara Gillard, “What’s Legal?—What’s Illegal,” in Lora Lumpe, ed., *Running Guns: The Global Black Market in Small Arms* (London: Zed Books, 2000), p. 27.

Tajikistan to the DRC.<sup>24</sup> The use of a narrow definition of “illicit” would exclude these covert sales undertaken by UN member states from international control, with potentially fatal consequences for the efficacy of any control regime. Clearly an effective control regime must be grounded in an international consensus supporting a more robust definition of the kinds of transfers that need to be limited.

### ***From Rhetoric to Effective Action: An Action Agenda***

Curbing wars by stemming the flow of light weaponry and small arms that fuel them has become an accepted goal of most UN member states. The question is how to get beyond hopeful rhetoric to the hard business of implementing realistic policies that can make a difference on this urgent and maddeningly complex issue.

The network of organizations and governments that has pushed the small arms issue onto the international agenda includes many of the key players in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which in less than a decade’s time was able not only to bring the problem of anti-personnel landmines to the world’s attention but to help craft and implement an international treaty banning the production, use, and export of these indiscriminate weapons. The campaign and its coordinator, Jody Williams, received the Nobel Peace Prize for this extraordinary effort. Though the landmines initiative demonstrates the power of the “new diplomacy”—in which NGOs working with “middle-power” governments like Canada and Norway can frame issues and create solutions to pressing international problems without the support of major powers like the United States and Russia—it offers no obvious tactical lessons against small arms proliferation.

For all the difficulties of the landmines campaign, its focus on a single weapon made it a far less complex undertaking than the campaign (or campaigns) to stem the spread of light weaponry. By contrast, small arms are the basic tools of most of the world’s military forces, whether one looks at government forces or paramilitaries. As noted before, they are cheap, easy to transport, and seemingly ubiquitous. Moreover, picking up a gun and joining a militia or rebel group has become a preferred survival strategy for far too many young people.

Because of the mind-boggling difficulties posed by the spread of small arms, the participants in the International Action Network on Small Arms realized early on

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<sup>24</sup> On the “boomerang” effect of U.S. arms transfers made for one purpose being turned against U.S. citizens and U.S. forces in other circumstances, see William D. Hartung, *U.S. Weapons at War* (New York: World Policy Institute, 1995), pp. 10–13 and 19–23. On leakage from the CIA’s Afghan arms pipeline into other conflict zones, see Chris Smith, “Light Arms and Ethnic Conflict in South Asia,” in Boutwell, Klare, and Reed, eds., *Lethal Commerce*, pp. 62–64.

that no single treaty or set of actions that would “solve” the problem of light weapons proliferation. Rather, what is needed is a series of overlapping measures involving stricter laws and regulations, greater transparency, public education and “norm building,” and innovative diplomatic and economic initiatives. As Natalie Goldring of the University of Maryland has suggested, the complex of U.S. initiatives in the area of automobile safety is an apt analogy for what campaigners against the misuse of small arms can hope to accomplish: a radical reduction in fatalities was achieved through a mix of stricter government regulations, public information, and technical improvements. Driving is still dangerous, but not nearly as dangerous as it was two or three decades ago before consumer advocates, anti-drunk-driving activists, and other interested citizens and governmental actors joined together to promote a broad array of traffic-safety measures. And while the effects of small arms proliferation are far more widespread and devastating than those of traffic accidents, the concept of crafting a multifaceted approach to put limits on dangerous behavior is still instructive.

### ***Information and Regulation***

Because the international arms control movement has historically focused the vast bulk of its attention on weapons of mass destruction, or “NBC” (Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological) systems, curbing the flow of conventional armaments has been neglected. Prior to the 1990s no international body, governmental or other, had even bothered to keep track of flows of small arms. As Michael Renner of the Worldwatch Institute has put it, small arms are the “orphans of arms control . . . their production, trade, and possession are essentially unmonitored and unregulated—subject to the ups and downs of demand rather than international policy.”<sup>25</sup> The UN register of conventional arms, a voluntary reporting mechanism on conventional arms imports and exports established after the Persian Gulf War, deals only with major systems. At the moment, the vast majority of the world’s governments provide no public information of any kind on the exports of small arms and light weaponry that they have brokered, authorized, and in some cases, financed. Only seven of the world’s 190 nation-states currently publish regular data on their exports of small arms, and only three of the seven provide details on the numbers and kinds of weapons exported.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Renner, “Arms Control Orphans,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (January/February 1999), p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> Figures cited by Peter Bachelor of the Small Arms Survey during the discussion period after a panel on small arms held at UN headquarters in New York, October 12, 2000. See [www.smallarmsurvey.org](http://www.smallarmsurvey.org) for research papers by the Small Arms Survey and details on the release of their forthcoming yearbook.

The situation in the United States, which provides more information on arms exports than any other nation, indicates how secretive and obscure the subject of light weapons transfers is at this point. Under an annual report required under Section 655 of the Foreign Assistance Act, the United States reports on commercial licenses issued for all types of weaponry, down to the level of guns and ammunition, providing the dollar value of the license, the name of the client nation, and a description of the type of weapon system involved. Sometimes the descriptions are quite detailed—for example, a notation for “rifle, M-16” indicates that it is a Colt Industries M-16 infantry rifle. Other listings—like an item on “pistols and revolvers”—are more generic. And so far at least, the listings cover the value, and sometimes the number of items, of approved licenses that are essentially an *authorization* to sell, but the documents are silent as to whether the items have actually been delivered to the client nation. Last but not least, the report generally contains information on licenses a year or two *after* they have been issued, too late in many cases to allow for meaningful criticism or discussion of questionable deals, such as a major small arms transfer to a country with a history of human rights abuses.

This failure to monitor the small arms trade is rooted in the assumption that these weapons are capable of doing far less damage than either major conventional systems or weapons of mass destruction, and that they are certainly not a factor affecting the military balance among states, either on a regional or international basis. One hopes that this Cold War view that small arms are too inconsequential to take up the time of statesmen is about to be relegated to the dustbin of history, where it belongs.

Keeping better track of the weapons would be an excellent place to start. First, the international community must establish standard, detailed reporting mechanisms on small arms production and trade at the national, regional, and international levels. This could include the publication of detailed annual reports by governments containing specific information on small arms transfer deliveries and licenses, the establishment of regional small arms registers modeled on the UN register of conventional armaments, and the creation of an agreed-upon international collection point (such as Interpol) for data on individuals and organizations involved in weapons trafficking.<sup>27</sup>

Second, there needs to be a uniform international system for marking and tracing the country of origin *and* transit countries for all small arms and light weapons, as has been discussed in connection with the OAS convention on illicit weapons trafficking and the international Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, and Other Related Material that was

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<sup>27</sup> For a state-of-the-art view of what governments and nonstate actors can and should do in the field of small arms regulation and control, see Sarah Meek, “Combating Arms Trafficking: Progress and Prospects”; Ted Leggett, “Law Enforcement and International Gun Trafficking”; and Lora Lumpe, “Summary of Recommendations for States and Citizens,” all in Lumpe, *Running Guns*, pp. 183–232.

under negotiation in Vienna as this went to press.<sup>28</sup> And finally, we need to develop practical measures for limiting the illegal movement of small arms across national borders, including stronger regulation of arms brokers and shippers, the creation of internationally standardized end-user certificates that cannot be readily forged or fabricated by arms dealers, and the implementation of detailed curbs on the licensed production of small arms in third countries, including penalties for transfers of arms produced under license to third countries without the authorization of the government of the country of origin.<sup>29</sup>

Efforts to tighten up regulations on small arms will run up against formidable obstacles, including the natural tendency of most states to restrict access to data on national security matters, the current global trend toward deregulation and privatization, and the virulent pro-gun cultures that exist in certain societies, including the United States. But the effort to regulate and track the trade must be made if there is to be any prospect of limiting the damage that these weapons are doing to individuals, communities, and in some cases entire regions.

### ***Asserting Control: Changing Government Policies***

Governments of the major arms-supplying states often act as if the small arms trade is the political or economic equivalent of a force of nature, beyond the reach of meaningful government action. This perspective is usually bolstered with reference to the vast quantities of small arms already in circulation and the involvement of dealers, profiteers, rebels, and criminal elements who are devilishly difficult to control, particularly in a rapidly changing global economy in which the movement of goods, money, and people is easier than it has ever been.

This view of beleaguered governments scrambling to catch up with sophisticated merchants of death is a half-truth at best. The easy availability of small arms is inextricably linked to the policies of supplier governments, and policy changes on the part of key governments can have a tremendous impact in limiting the light weapons trade.

For starters, governments should establish an international legal presumption against arming nonstate actors. Many of the arms-trafficking “hot spots” in the world today—from the northwest frontier area of Pakistan, to southern Africa, to Central America—are awash in secondhand small arms that are left over from the Cold War, when

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<sup>28</sup> The firearms protocol is discussed in Meek, “Combating Arms Trafficking,” pp. 199–202.

<sup>29</sup> On the issue of licensed production of small arms see Peter Abel, “Manufacturing Trends: Globalizing the Source,” in Lumpe, *Running Guns*, pp. 81–104; on regulating brokers and shippers, see Brian Wood and Johann Peleman, “Making the Deal and Moving the Goods: The Role of Brokers and Shippers,” also in *Running Guns*, pp. 129–54.

the United States and the Soviet Union helped finance and supply light weapons to their clients of choice. Small arms almost always outlast the political relationships that existed between the original supplier and recipient, and one needs look no farther than the anti-U.S. activities of Osama Bin Laden and his network of former Afghan “freedom fighters” to see how covert arms sales can come back to haunt supplier nations.

In July 1998 Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy put forward a preliminary proposal for a ban on arms sales to nonstate actors, suggesting that governments should not

engage in acts that inappropriately arm non-state actors, either directly or indirectly. This principle would hold that small arms and light weapons designed and manufactured to military specifications for use as lethal instruments of war are reserved for the possession and use of armed forces. Non-state actors should not be armed and equipped as though they were armies themselves.<sup>30</sup>

Banning government transfers of arms to rebels and revolutionaries is a controversial proposition, both from the perspective of governments seeking freedom to engage in covert action and rebel groups arguing that they have a right to arm themselves in opposition to repressive regimes. Axworthy’s reference to “inappropriately” arming nonstate actors suggests that there is room for discussion of special cases where there is an international consensus in favor of supporting a particular opposition group faced with an especially vicious and illegitimate regime, with the notion that government arming of nonstate military forces would nonetheless be the exception rather than the rule. As Lucy Mathiak and Lora Lumpe point out in an extremely thoughtful essay on this issue, it is worth ironing out the complications standing in the way of banning arms sales to nongovernmental forces because “developing clear international law barring small arms supply to sub-state actors would be one of the most meaningful policies that concerned governments and non-governmental organizations could pursue to curb further dangerous small arms proliferation.”<sup>31</sup> If practical exceptions were granted for arming legitimate movements and governments that are “outgunned” by international outlaws, the notion of restricting the ability of governments to arm nonstate groups would be well worth pursuing.

Supplier nations also need to impose stricter standards on their “overt” arms sales, which all too often end up in the hands of repressive governments that either use them against their own citizens or pass them on to government-supported militias, as happened in East Timor when the Indonesian armed forces transferred their mostly

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<sup>30</sup> The Axworthy quote is from Lucy Mathiak and Lora Lumpe, “Government Gun Running to Guerrillas,” in Lumpe, *Running Guns*, p. 73.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

European- and U.S.-supplied light weapons to the anti-independence militias that engaged in brutal massacres there in September 1999.

In an effort to staunch the flow of weapons to dictators, despots, and thugs, an international movement is seeking to establish codes of conduct that would limit sales of weaponry to undemocratic regimes, systematic human rights abusers, aggressor nations, and governmental or nongovernmental forces that use imported weaponry in ways that violate international humanitarian law. In the United States, this movement has won passage of a bill sponsored by Representatives Cynthia McKinney (D-GA) and Sam Gejdenson (D-CT) that encourages the Executive branch to consider explicit standards of human rights performance when deciding whether to approve an arms sale. The European Union has established its own code of conduct, which also gives pride of place to issues of human rights and political and economic stability. Both of these initiatives, however, are nonbinding, so their main contribution to date has been to help establish stronger international norms against arming repressive governments and corrupt military and police forces. The most comprehensive proposal thus far is the International Code of Conduct, promoted by a commission of Nobel Peace Prize winners led by former Costa Rican president Oscar Arias. The Nobel laureate's code has not yet been enacted by any international body, but it stands as a powerful moral challenge to the major arms-supplying nations to put their policies where their pronouncements are by imposing strict and verifiable standards against arming undemocratic governments or fueling local and regional wars.<sup>32</sup>

Governments also have a responsibility to ensure that their domestic policies on the ownership and distribution of firearms are not so lax that they inadvertently fuel the illicit international traffic in small arms. In the United States, for example—which by one estimate accounts for fully half of the small arms currently in circulation worldwide—the ease with which individuals and gun dealers can get access to large numbers of military-style weapons with relatively few questions asked has made the United States a virtual small-arms supermarket for criminal and drug syndicates and paramilitary groups, not only from the Western Hemisphere but from around the world.<sup>33</sup> Stricter licensing of gun owners and dealers (including small, kitchen-table operations and gun shows), further restrictions on the right of individual citizens to own firearms

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<sup>32</sup> For background on the code of conduct campaign in the United States and links to information on activities around the world, consult the Internet site of the Arms Sales Monitoring Project of the Federation of American Scientists at [www.fas.org/asmp](http://www.fas.org/asmp). For detailed analysis of the EU Code and other regional and international efforts, also consult the Web site of the British American Security Information Council (BASIC), at [www.basicint.org](http://www.basicint.org).

<sup>33</sup> The rough estimate of the U.S. share of global stockpiles of small arms is from a presentation made by Natalie Goldring of the University of Maryland at a workshop on small arms sponsored by the UN Department of Disarmament Affairs in conjunction with the NGO Committee on Disarmament, held at UN Headquarters in New York on October 12, 2000.

built to military specifications, and a national “one gun a month law” that would inhibit the accumulation of firearms by “straw purchasers” representing illegitimate users are among the measures that the United States should consider if it wants to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem of small arms proliferation.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Small Arms and the Business of War: Shifting Economic Incentives***

At first glance, one of the advantages of working to curb the spread of small arms appears to be the fact that the export of light weapons is not a big business for the world’s major defense conglomerates. With a few exceptions, most of the titans of the global military industry have little or no involvement in the production or export of small arms. Furthermore, given the glut of secondhand systems and the large number of potential suppliers, it is not a terribly lucrative business. From the supplier side of the ledger, one would think that efforts to limit small arms and light weapons would not face the kind of dug-in political resistance that accompanies efforts to curb the export of major systems like combat aircraft, which can be quite lucrative for the exporting company.

But just as information on black markets and underground economies is essential to understanding both local and global economies, a full understanding of the economics of the arms trade requires a closer look at who profits from the illicit transfer of light weapons. Small arms sales are hugely important to the motley collection of corrupt military officials, self-proclaimed rebel leaders, brokers, bankers, shippers, and other middlemen who feed off of them. It is at the local and regional level and in the war zones that the economic addiction to weapons trafficking needs to be addressed—not just in the capitals of the major arms-supplying nations.

One of the key issues in stemming the small arms trade is figuring out how the major players in the “small wars” of the world are financing their weapons purchases. In March 2000, spurred on by the efforts of dedicated NGOs like Global Witness, a London-based research and advocacy group that studies the links between war and natural resources, the UN issued a surprisingly pointed and exquisitely detailed document, *Report of the Panel of Experts on Violations of Security Council Sanctions Against UNITA*. This amazing document provides a detailed inside look at how one rebel group, Jonas Savimbi’s Union for the Total Independence of Angola, has kept its arsenals stocked to the bursting point since the end of the Cold War. Unlike most UN docu-

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<sup>34</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this critical point, see Wendy Cukier and Steven Shropshire, “Domestic Gun Markets: The Licit-Ilicit Links,” in Lumpe, *Running Guns*, pp. 105–28.

ments, which avoid criticizing specific individuals and governments, this report, which was researched and written by a panel of experts appointed by the UN Security Council and chaired by Canadian UN Ambassador Donald Fowler, pulls no punches in laying out a list of individuals, companies, and even heads of state who have contributed to and profited from UNITA's illicit "guns for diamonds" trade.

With the benefit of testimony from several defectors from UNITA who had been intimately involved in the organization's weapons-procurement network, the report documents how UNITA took diamonds that it mined in the areas of Angola under its control, and, with the help of international arms dealers, diamond experts, and military and government officials of other African states, swapped them for everything from guns and ammunition to transport aircraft and fuel depots. One of the most telling revelations to emerge from the Fowler Report, as it has come to be known, is that in the 1990s UNITA was able to raise far more support for its military efforts through illicit diamond trading (an estimated \$2 billion or more) than it received in covert weapons aid from the United States during the 1970s and 1980s—when it was a favored anti-communist U.S. client, receiving over \$250 million in secret arms deliveries.<sup>35</sup> The Fowler Report's quite reasonable suggestion that the companies, individuals, and countries involved in violating the sanctions against UNITA should themselves face penalties has yet to be seriously acted upon by the Security Council, but it should be.

There are also international discussions under way outside the UN with the goal of establishing a system for curbing the sale of the "conflict diamonds" that have fueled illicit arms purchases not only in Angola but in Sierra Leone as well. It is too early to tell what impact these talks may eventually have on limiting the ability of local warlords and paramilitaries to keep their arsenals stocked, but the participation of the diamond industry, key governments, and concerned NGOs in the process gives reason to hope that something concrete may yet be achieved on this score.<sup>36</sup>

Over the past few years, the Development Research Group at the World Bank has done some extremely interesting research on the broader question of the econom-

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<sup>35</sup> UN Security Council, *Report of the Panel of Experts on Violations of Security Council Sanctions Against UNITA*, March 10, 2000; available at [www.un.int/canada/html/angolareport.htm](http://www.un.int/canada/html/angolareport.htm). For a detailed assessment of the practicalities of stemming the flow of conflict diamonds, see the excellent reports by the London-based nongovernmental research group Global Witness, *Conflict Diamonds: Possibilities for the Identification, Certification, and Control of Diamonds* and *A Rough Trade: The Role of Companies and Governments in the Angolan Conflict*, available at [www.oneworld.org/globalwitness](http://www.oneworld.org/globalwitness). For background on U.S. covert aid to UNITA, see Lucy Mathiak, "Light Weapons and Internal Conflict in Angola," in Klare and Boutwell, *Lethal Commerce*, pp. 81–97.

<sup>36</sup> Associated Press, "Halt to 'Blood Diamonds' Urged," October 25, 2000. For a recent analysis of the "blood diamonds" problem, see John Hirsch's occasional paper for the International Peace Academy, *Sierra Leone: Diamonds and the Struggle for Democracy* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2001).

ic factors driving the most intractable and persistent internal wars. The thrust of this research, which has been conducted primarily by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, is to suggest that certain key economic conditions, such as substantial dependency on primary commodity exports, low educational levels, and extreme poverty, all drastically increase the likelihood that a given nation will be embroiled in a violent internal conflict. Primary commodities provide a ready source of financing, while a lack of economic alternatives makes it easier to recruit rebel soldiers. Other factors—such as a split between two major ethnic groups and the existence of a large diaspora in the United States that could be appealed to for funding—were also found to correlate closely with internal violence. Based on this analysis, Collier has suggested that conflict-prevention efforts be focused on a combination of medium- to long-term measures such as increases in educational opportunities and reductions in poverty levels, and on short-term measures such as more effective UN sanctions—like those called for in the Fowler Report—that would make “the economic and military circumstances of rebellion more difficult.”<sup>37</sup>

### ***From Rhetoric to Reality: Taking the Long View***

From the League of Nations arms register and the Nye Committee hearings on “merchants of death” held by the U.S. Congress in the 1930s to the “Big Five” arms-transfer-control talks of the early 1990s and the current international preoccupation with small arms, efforts to rein in the global weapons trade have been long on rhetoric and short on practical solutions.

Will this new round of concern about the consequences of weapons trafficking fare any better than its historical predecessors? The short answer is probably. In the half dozen years that the problem of small arms proliferation has been on the international agenda, it has already spurred several important regional initiatives, including those of the OAS and ECOMOG. Destruction of surplus small arms has become an important component of peace accords and demobilization efforts from the Balkans to southern Africa. Small arms have drawn the attention of international law-enforcement officials, most notably in the context of the Vienna protocol on firearms. And an impressive network of governmental agencies and NGOs concerned with human rights, public health, arms control, international law, and sustainable development have placed the small arms problem at the top of their agenda. On a

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Collier, *Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and Their Implications for Policy* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Development Research Group, 2000), p. 20. See also Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War” (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Policy Research Group Working Paper 2355, 2000).

small scale at least—through UN-sponsored “arms for development” programs that offer economic options to demobilized fighters and the international campaign to stop the sale of “blood diamonds” that fuel some of the world’s most vicious civil wars—the economic incentives driving today’s small wars are being addressed as well.

If these efforts to deal comprehensively with the supply and demand factors fueling the trade in small arms and light weapons are sustained and expanded over the next decade, there is every reason to believe that rampant small arms proliferation can be contained. Even under the most rigorous regulatory scheme, there will still be wily traffickers and opportunistic tyrants who will be able to exploit the weapons trade to serve their own ends. Their numbers can be substantially reduced, however, and the use of small arms as a way to wield power through a program of calculated terror and controlled anarchy can be made the exception rather than the rule in regions of tension.

Curbing the small arms trade is an idea whose time has come. The negative consequences—in death, destruction, trauma, and the rending of the social fabric—of letting this historic opportunity slip by create a strong moral imperative for sustained action against runaway weapons trafficking. Let us hope that concerned governments, NGOs, and the citizens of our increasingly interconnected world are able to rise to the challenge.