

## Introduction

# Ammunition for Small Arms and Light Weapons: Understanding the Issues and Addressing the Challenges

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Ammunition arguably constitutes the most lethal part of any weapon system. Used in conjunction with the weapons for which it was designed, ammunition plays a decisive role in escalating, prolonging, and intensifying armed conflict and crime, while also undermining security, development, and effective governance. Nevertheless, international efforts to control the damaging effects of trafficking, proliferation, and misuse of small arms and light weapons have generally sidestepped the issue of ammunition. Firearms have essentially been dissociated from their ammunition on the international agenda.

The predictable result is that the regulation and control of firearms have begun to take shape while ammunition remains relatively marginalized, even ignored, as an issue for international action.<sup>1</sup> Ownership, production, and transfers of firearms are today generally regulated by national legislation, although laws vary widely in their stringency and effectiveness. At the regional and international levels, a number of important agreements have been established since the mid-1990s to prevent and reduce the misuse, trafficking, and proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Ammunition is neglected, and often barely acknowledged, within this burgeoning legal and political framework on the regional and international levels.

Yet the policy imbalance engendered by the artificial separation of firearm and ammunition need not persist. *Targeting Ammunition* represents a timely step towards sensitizing the policy and research communities to the urgent need for effective regulation and control of the production, transfer, storage, and destruction of ammunition. In providing a comprehensive overview of the defining characteristics of ammunition, as well as related policy issues, this volume makes a robust case for treating the problem of ammunition as a vital

aspect of a broader effort to prevent, reduce, and combat the uncontrolled and illicit flow of small arms and light weapons.

*Targeting Ammunition* features contributions by experts who identify and examine gaps and challenges in current policies and programmes, and highlight opportunities to enhance national and international controls on ammunition. The book is organized in three parts:

- Part I outlines some of the core issues relating to ammunition for small arms and light weapons, including technical characteristics, structures and processes of ammunition production, and authorized and illicit transfers.
- Part II addresses the significance and role of ammunition for small arms and light weapons in key contexts in which it is widely used or misused—situations of armed conflict and crime.
- Part III examines problems and issues in three areas where progress towards international cooperation and coordination on ammunition for small arms and light weapons is particularly necessary: marking and tracing, stockpile management and security, and destruction and disposal of confiscated or surplus stocks.

The section below clarifies and explores why ammunition represents a missed opportunity in the field of controlling the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. A review of how this particular issue has been framed and addressed on the international policy agenda is then undertaken to assess the current situation and how it can be improved.

## Why ammunition matters

Against the backdrop of intense international debate on small arms and light weapons, small arms ammunition has tended to be sidelined. Yet there are numerous reasons why ammunition should move to the forefront of international scrutiny.

The most obvious reason is scale. While global annual production of military small arms and light weapons has been estimated at 1–2 million items, the number of cartridges produced each year undoubtedly runs into the billions (Small Arms Survey, 2003, p. 13). In the case of the United States alone, the

Lake City Arms Ammunition Plant produces around 1.2 billion small calibre cartridges each year for the US Army (Greene, Holt, and Wilkinson, 2005, p. 13). Even these quantities are insufficient to supply US forces in combat and millions more rounds of ammunition have been imported to cover the shortfall (Small Arms Survey, 2005, p. 20).

A second reason why ammunition is of paramount importance concerns the old axiom that 'a gun without ammunition is useless.' While the reality is more nuanced, high levels of ammunition consumption during periods of armed conflict mean that the continuing availability of supplies is particularly critical to combatants.

State armed forces and non-state armed groups change tactics or curtail fighting when faced with ammunition shortages, as exemplified by the cases of Liberia and Burundi (see Chapter 5).<sup>2</sup> In some parts of the world insufficient ammunition has brought about the near-disappearance of certain types of weapon. The case of the G3 assault rifle in a number of East African states is only one example.

Ammunition can be used only once, while weapons can function for decades with minimal maintenance. Controlling ammunition flows can help control the use of these durable weapons, even in cases where little can be done to control the proliferation and stockpiling of small arms and light weapons.

Nevertheless, ammunition remains a relative bastion of state secrecy even in contrast to small arms and light weapons. Because of its critical role in sustaining combat, armed forces have been particularly concerned to keep information about stock secret, and there are few reliable publicly-available indicators of the scale and mode of ammunition stockpiling at the national level. Not surprisingly, reliable information about holdings of non-state armed groups and criminals is also scarce.

Where the true extent and nature of ammunition stocks is hidden, the adequacy of arrangements for safe storage and security from theft, loss, or accident also remains largely out of public view. As international concern and awareness has increased, it has become clear that arrangements for secure and safe storage are very inadequate in many states. In numerous countries, for example in countries of the former Soviet Union, gigantic quantities of ammunition appear to be at risk. The potential for diversion, misplacement, and catastrophic inci-

dent are all too clear in these cases (Greene, Holt, and Wilkinson, 2005, p. 14). It seems likely that such problems exist in many countries across the world.

## Framing the ammunition issue

Ammunition has received only tacit recognition in the small arms and light weapons debate. The gun has been squarely at the centre of debate and ammunition has remained a secondary consideration.

The 1997 Report of the UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms (UNGA, 1997) and the 1999 Report of the UN Group of Governmental Experts on Small Arms (UNGA, 1999) considered cartridges, missiles and rockets, and other projectiles (such as grenades and mortars) fired by small arms and light weapons to be part of the small arms and light weapons category (UNGA, 1997, para. 29; UNGA, 1999, para. I/11).<sup>3</sup> The explosives and ammunition listed by the 1997 UN Panel are the subject of this book.

Thus far, however, international norms, commitments, and programmes designed in relation to small arms and light weapons have rarely addressed these types of ammunition. Where international attention has focused on ammunition, it has been viewed as a corollary to small arms and light weapons issues. This has overshadowed the distinctive characteristics that justify addressing ammunition in its own right.

These characteristics, and the structures and processes of ammunition production, transfer, holdings, storage, use or misuse, and disposal, may mean that policy responses must be redesigned and refocused in order to be effective.

In terms of transfers, for instance, the fact that the 1997 UN Panel included explosives in its list of ammunition for small arms and light weapons has a number of consequences. In contrast to small arms and light weapons, the explosive qualities of ammunition make it a 'dangerous good'. Its packaging and transportation must fulfil specific standards. This can be particularly important, since requirements include appropriate markings on the ammunition packaging and a certain amount of paperwork, which can then be used to track transfers and, possibly, identify points of diversion (see Chapter 4). The requirements, costs, and techniques for the unique marking of all cartridges are also different to those for weapons such as pistols or automatic rifles.

A related distinguishing feature of ammunition, in contrast to small arms and light weapons, is the risk of explosion when improperly stored and handled. In January 2002, for instance, an ammunition dump located in a densely populated area of Lagos, Nigeria, exploded—killing more than 1,000 people.<sup>4</sup> Other explosive incidents linked to poor storage or unsafe handling of ammunition are numerous, and their effects on human security can be disastrous (see Chapter 8).

This explosive characteristic poses problems for destruction as well as storage. The often substantial quantities of ammunition handed in during weapons collection programmes pose special risks, requiring specialist management and storage. Destruction of ammunition for small arms and light weapons is a more demanding technical task than destroying the weapons themselves. It is nevertheless a necessary one.

Surplus stocks can represent a physical and environmental hazard once they deteriorate. They can fall prey to diversion (whether by loss or theft), ultimately falling into the hands of non-state armed groups and criminals. Ensuring the safe storage of ammunition, and the destruction of insecure surpluses, promises positive effects for public health, economic development, and reducing the illicit transfer of arms (Greene, Holt, and Wilkinson, 2005, p. 9).

The characteristics of ammunition that set it apart from small arms and light weapons suggest a number of specific priorities for action, of which the following are particularly urgent:

- Develop mechanisms for marking ammunition; keeping records of transfers; and enable cooperation in tracing, so as to enable points of loss or diversion to be identified (Chapter 7);
- Promote safe and secure storage of ammunition, including that for small arms and light weapons, particularly in transitional countries and conflict-prone regions (Chapter 8);
- Ensure the rapid destruction of a large proportion of the substantial stocks of surplus ammunition that currently exist (Chapter 9).

## Tackling ammunition: missed opportunities

At the international level, the first substantial international debates and movements towards establishing international standards on the transfer and use of

ammunition can be seen in the 1890s. In 1899, the First Hague Peace Conference adopted Declaration (IV,3) Concerning Expanding Bullets, by which 'the Contracting Parties agree to abstain from use of bullets which expand or flatten easily in the human body, such as bullets with a hard envelope which does not entirely cover the core or is pierced with incisions' (ICRC, 2005). The prohibition on the military use of such soft-nosed or semi-jacketed bullets is now widely accepted, has the status of international customary law, and is included in the definition of 'war crime' employed by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Coupland and Loye, 2003, p. 136; UN, 1998, Art. 8, no. 2 b xix).

It was not until the 1990s, however, that the debate progressed substantially on international and regional norms and programmes to control small arms and light weapons, including most types of ammunition for such weapons. As the issue emerged as a focus for international attention, it tended to be framed differently in different regions. Central and South American countries particularly focused on combating illicit trafficking, and were concerned with improvised explosive devices (such as the bombs used by non-state actors) as much as with ammunition and arms. Under their influence, the Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and other Related Materials, agreed by the Organisation of American States in 1997, explicitly addressed ammunition and explosives (OAS, 1997).

In contrast, in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) context, small arms and light weapons, as well as ammunition and explosives, tended to be considered distinct areas for regional standard setting and cooperation. Concerns about improvised explosive devices led to agreements on restrictions and chemical marking of high-explosive materials, and to agreements on cooperation to combat and prevent terrorism. However, the main OSCE agreement on small arms and light weapons focuses on controls on arms, and explicitly addresses ammunition only in the context of post-conflict Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes (OSCE, 2000, Section V, D, 5).

The report of the 1997 UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms included ammunition for small arms and light weapons as an intrinsic part of the small arms and light weapons category and recommended the specific study of such ammunition and the explosives issue (UNGA, 1997). This led

in 1998 to the establishment of a UN Group of Governmental Experts on ammunition and explosives for this purpose. The report of this Group, issued in June 1999, examined what was known about the manufacture; legal and illicit transfer; marking and tracing; destruction and disposal; levels of stocks and surpluses; and existing legislative control of small arms and light weapons ammunition and explosives (UNGA, 1999). Its key conclusion was that relatively little was known about these questions, implying an urgent need for improved transparency and further research. At the same time, there was sufficient knowledge to support a series of recommendations for action through the UN and regional frameworks.

Most of these recommendations, however, went unheeded. Ammunition and explosives were an important focus of dispute in the second Group of Governmental Experts on Small Arms, the purpose of which was to review progress towards implementing the recommendations and consider how to develop and establish international norms and programmes on small arms and light weapons within UN frameworks. While there was little dispute in principle about the importance of including ammunition for small arms and light weapons as an integral part of small arms and light weapons problems and action programmes, key states were strongly divided about explosives. Some states, such as Colombia and Mexico, were strong advocates for including them (especially those relevant to improvised explosive devices), but countries such as China, Russia, the United States, and several European Union (EU) member states were opposed.

The issue could not be properly resolved and the result was that explosives were not substantially addressed in the new recommendations. This had an important impact on the drafting of those recommendations that explicitly referred to ammunition. If a draft included the word 'ammunition', it was feared that there would be strong pressure from some participants to add the phrase 'and explosives' or to include sections that explicitly addressed explosives. In this context, the Group's report tended only to refer to 'small arms and light weapons' as a generic category, which all participants could accept on the basis of different understandings of what it encompassed.

The resulting Report (UNGA, 1999) formed the basis for preparations for the 2001 UN Conference on small arms and light weapons and the UN Programme

of Action (PoA) that resulted, which now provides the main international framework for action on small arms and light weapons (UNGA, 2001a). Although most participants in the UN Conference understood ammunition to be an integral part of the small arms and light weapons category, this was not specifically addressed in the PoA. Ammunition was, however, included in the 2001 UN Firearms Protocol of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, an international agreement of more limited scope (UNGA, 2001b).

Since 2001, much of the international community has remained aloof regarding the issue of ammunition for small arms and light weapons.<sup>5</sup> The recently adopted *International Tracing Instrument*, for instance, does not include ammunition (UNGA, 2005, Section VI, 27), despite the easy steps that could be taken to improve ammunition marking and the positive consequences this could have in establishing responsibilities in cases of misuse or diversion to illicit recipients (Carle, 2005–06, pp. 51–52; see also Chapter 7). Similarly, cooperative programmes to promote and support the collection of small arms and light weapons, stockpile security, and the destruction of surplus or confiscated stocks have generally included ammunition as well as weapons, although often without adequate attention to the specific challenges posed by ammunition. It is therefore fair to say that ammunition has received only scant attention, being considered at best as an accessory to the weapons, and at worse as a ‘complex’ issue that should be detached from the ‘small arms and light weapons’ debate and policy agenda.

## This book

This book aims to provide a systematic review of the characteristics, processes, and challenges relating to ammunition for small arms and light weapons. Even more than for small arms and light weapons, there are substantial gaps in knowledge and understanding. This book is an attempt to fill these gaps and to open the way to more research on ammunition-related matters. Some useful initial studies have been published (see, for instance, DeClerq, 1998; Stohl, 1998; UNGA, 1999; Anders, 2005; Greene, Holt, and Wilkinson, 2005; Small Arms Survey, 2005), and substantial information is dispersed among various professional and practitioner communities. This book provides (to the knowl-



edge of the authors) the first book-length study of key dimensions of the issue area. It is necessarily incomplete, however, and it is hoped that it will inspire other researchers to study in turn this important topic.

A key consideration in writing this book is the urgent need for a reliable ‘primer’ to enable relevant international policy communities to engage with this central topic. Many of the obstacles to progress on international and regional agreements in this area appear to stem from a lack of basic knowledge and understanding in large sections of the policy community of the key characteristics of ammunition for small arms and light weapons; its production and proliferation; the distinctive questions and challenges posed in the key contexts of misuse; and the immediate priorities for international action. These therefore form the three main sections of this book.

Part I on core issues begins with a chapter by James Bevan and Stéphanie Pézard introducing the basic characteristics of the range of types of ammunition for small arms and light weapons. After a brief overview of the history of the development of such ammunition, Bevan and Pézard review the different types of ammunition currently in use as well as their effects and characteristics, and examine emerging developments—some of which tend to blur the distinction between small arms and light weapons.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively, address production, authorized transfers, and illicit transfers of ammunition for small arms and light weapons. Systematic and reliable information is scarce in each of these areas, but the authors bring together what exists to examine key characteristics, processes and structures. In Chapter 2, Holger Anders and Reinhilde Weidacher review key characteristics of the production of small arms and light weapons and examine the structures and trends in ammunition industries. These include a discussion of the prospects for improving international controls on ammunition production, including controls on transfers of production capacities and of ammunition components.

Chapter 3 by Anne-Kathrin Glatz on authorized transfers of small arms ammunition uses UN Comtrade data to identify the major exporters and importers of ammunition for small arms and light weapons. The chapter also includes a discussion of authorized ammunition transfers to countries in conflict or with a record of major human rights abuses, and to their neighbours—cases in which authorized transfers of ammunition can be particularly problematic.

The characteristics and processes of illicit trafficking in ammunition for small arms and light weapons are examined by Mike Bourne and Ilhan Berkol in Chapter 4. The chapter identifies four relatively distinct modalities for illicit trafficking—the ‘ant-trade’, covert sponsorship by governments, diversion of legal supplies, and international black market transfers.

Part II of the book examines the significance and specific features of ammunition for small arms and light weapons in key contexts of misuse: armed crime and armed conflict. In Chapter 5, Stéphanie Pézard examines demand for ammunition in contexts of armed conflict, how ammunition reaches theatres of conflict, how it affects conflict, and what happens to ammunition when the armed conflict ends.

Chapter 6 by Pablo Dreyfus focuses on ammunition misuse in the context of crime, particularly organized crime in states where controls are relatively weak. The chapter adopts a case study approach to illustrate some of the key questions and national efforts being made to tackle the problem, focusing on recent experience in Brazil. The chapter examines in detail the processes of ammunition supply and procurement by criminal gangs as well as some recent responses, particularly those associated with the new Federal Statute of Disarmament which came into force in 2004.

Part III of this book examines three issue areas for which international action on small arms and light weapons is particularly urgent: marking and tracing; stockpile security and safety; and stockpile destruction and disposal. In Chapter 7, Holger Anders examines the specific challenges posed by developing effective international standards for marking, record keeping, and tracing ammunition for small arms and light weapons. Anders examines existing standards and practices, particularly for marking the range of types of ammunition for such weapons, and discusses the implications for developing international standards on marking and cooperation in tracing.

Management and security of small arms and light weapons stockpiles is the subject of Chapter 8, by Adrian Wilkinson. The chapter systematically examines each of the key dimensions of this task, such as stockpile safety, best practice guidelines, and minimum standards. Stockpile safety is an important issue because of the explosive components of ammunition, and many inadequately managed stocks pose substantial risks to people in and around the

storage areas. Chapter 9, also by Wilkinson, reviews techniques for ammunition destruction and recent international efforts to promote and support the destruction of surplus stocks.

Policy-makers, researchers, and other readers will easily identify the two recurring themes of *Targeting Ammunition*: first, contributors make repeated calls for further research on and greater international understanding of ammunition issues; and second, they stress the need for rapid progress towards the development of national, regional, and international standards and programmes that address ammunition. The 2006 United Nations Conference to Review Progress Made in the Implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects will review the achievements made by the *Programme of Action* since 2001 and provide directions for the future. This represents an major opportunity to address these issues and to build momentum towards sustained national, regional, and international action. Whether ammunition is considered to be an integral part of the small arms and light weapons it fuels or an entity in its own right, it is high time that the international community increased its efforts to control ammunition proliferation and misuse. This volume provides it with an impetus to do so. ■

## Endnotes

- 1 Some countries nevertheless recognize the importance of the issue of ammunition and have attempted to promote it on the international stage; a French–German contribution entitled ‘Food for Thought for Possible Draft Elements on Ammunition for a Final Document on the UN SALW Programme at Action Review Conference 2006’ was presented on 17 January 2006 at the Preparatory Committee of the UN Conference to Review Progress Made in the Implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (France and Germany, 2006).
- 2 This is the case unless groups can switch weapons and use those for which ammunition is available, but most armed groups—and indeed state armed forces—do not have this luxury.
- 3 ‘Small arms’ are understood to include all conventional weapons that can be carried and operated by an individual combatant. The category of ‘light weapons’ constitutes conventional arms that can be carried and operated by a small unit of 2–4 personnel, and could, for example, be mounted on the back of a Jeep. ‘Small arms’ include: revolvers and self-loading pistols; rifles and carbines; assault rifles; sub-machine guns; and light machine guns. ‘Light arms’ include: heavy machine guns; hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade

- launchers; portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns; recoilless rifles; portable launchers of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missile systems; and mortars of less than 100 mm calibre (UNGA, 1997, paras. 26–27). In principle, anti-personnel land mines are also included as small arms and light weapons. However, since these are the focus of separate international agreements and policies, they were placed in a category of their own.
- 4 As noted by the UN mission that reported on this incident: ‘The majority of fatalities occurred not from the actual explosion, but due to the subsequent panic which followed the incident’ (UNDAC, 2002, p. 3).
  - 5 A number of states opposed this, arguing that ammunition for small arms and light weapons was beyond the scope of the instrument and should therefore be addressed in other frameworks.

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Ammunition collected during the disarmament process following Burundi's civil war. From left to right: a 7.62 mm x 39 mm cartridge, a 7.62 mm x 51 mm cartridge, a 12-gauge shotgun shell, and a 12.7 mm x 108 mm cartridge.  
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