

Foreword

by Jayantha Dhanapala

Civil wars and other forms of civil conflict have been taking place with alarming frequency and intensity in recent years, causing the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, displacing many millions of innocent people, and bringing economic ruin and social disaster for numerous societies. Such conflicts have been fought largely with small arms and light weapons (SALW).

SALW have proliferated around the world to such an extent that they are easily available in many societies for a modest price. In some parts of the world, for example, an AK-47 semiautomatic rifle can be purchased for merely six dollars. Such easy availability has contributed significantly to the prolongation of many civil conflicts, where the vast majority of victims have been civilians, mainly women and children.

The problems posed by the global proliferation of SALW extend beyond the role that such weapons play in exacerbating civil wars. Their easy availability can undermine peace-building efforts in postconflict situations by creating a general climate of insecurity and by enabling armed and ambitious groups to pursue their violent and self-serving agendas.

Even in nonconflict situations, the proliferation of SALW can be a major cause of concern because the ease with which such arms can be acquired can contribute directly to an increase in social crime and political violence, and even terrorism. A culture of violence, buttressed by SALW proliferation, can be found in many areas of the world.

The task of combating SALW proliferation is not an easy one. Such weapons are easy to carry and conceal, and their clandestine transfers are therefore hard to detect. This has enabled large quantities of arms to move with relative ease and secrecy from one conflict or postconflict zone to another. To add to the problem, the scale of international trade and commerce in a globalized world offers opportunities for illegal shipments and transfers of arms to slip through normal customs control and monitoring procedures.

Illicit trafficking poses a bigger problem in situations where large and difficult borders separate arms-infested societies or where an incipient social unrest offers an opening to arms merchants. In such geographical areas, effective monitoring is inherently difficult and requires resources that are not usually available.

The global spread of organized crime, together with the nexus between drug traffickers and terrorists, has made combating illicit trafficking a daunting task. To make matters worse, political and bureaucratic corruption, which are rampant in many societies, have made illicit trafficking that much easier.

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It is equally important to focus attention on the demand side of the problem, complex as that is. The causes of conflict and organized violence within societies and between states are varied. They can be political, economic, ideological, ethnic, religious, territorial, or historical in nature.

Despite these enormous challenges and complexities, the urgency of dealing with the misuse of small arms and light weapons cannot be overemphasized, given its highly negative impact on the social, economic, and political development of affected societies.

SALW proliferation is a global problem that calls for sustained and internationally supported actions, backed by strong political will and adequate resources. It must also be pursued in tandem with other global actions to address issues of poor governance and underdevelopment, which are primary causes of civil conflict and social strife in many societies.

International expectation is currently focused on the first United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, which will be held in New York in July 2001. It is my hope that, with all the preparatory work that has been done, this important event will prove to be landmark in the incipient global effort to protect international society from the violence associated with SALW. 