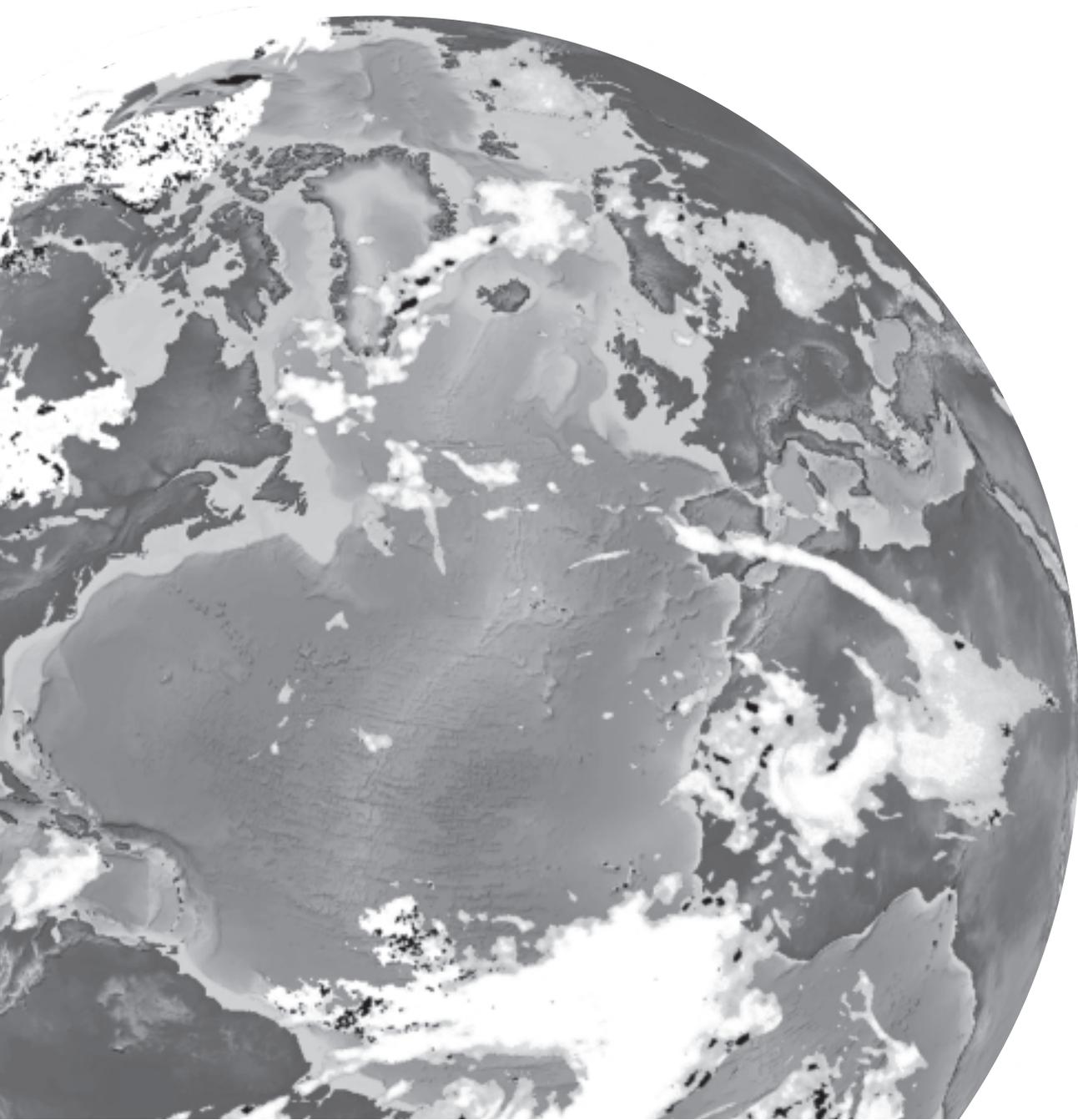


Light Weapons and Civil Violence

Policy Options for the International
Community Project on World Security

PROJECT ON WORLD SECURITY
ROCKEFELLER BROTHERS FUND

Jeffrey Boutwell and Michael Klare



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JEFFREY BOUTWELL is associate executive officer of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, where he directs the program on international security studies. A former staff aide on the National Security Council during the Carter Administration, he has written and consulted widely on issues relating to small arms and light weapons and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. With Michael Klare, he is co-editor of *Light Weapons and Civil Violence: Controlling the Tools of Violence* (1999).

MICHAEL KLARE is the Five College Professor of Peace and World Security Studies (a joint appointment at Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and Smith colleges and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst) and director of the Five College Program in Peace and World Security Studies. In addition to co-editing *Light Weapons and Civil Violence* (1999) with Jeffrey Boutwell, he has written on the diffusion of small arms in Latin America and the global trade in light weapons.

ROCKEFELLER BROTHERS FUND, INC.
437 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022-7001
Telephone: 212.812.4200
Facsimile: 212.812.4299
E-mail: rock@rbf.org
World Wide Web: www.rbf.org

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INTRODUCTION

One of the dominant features of the global community in the 1990s has been the violent breakdown of civil society in dozens of countries throughout the world. From the socialist states of the former Soviet bloc to more than a dozen countries in the developing world, we have witnessed the outbreak of ethnic, religious, racial, linguistic, and other forms of communal strife and the melting away of social norms and government structures that would otherwise contain the violence. Adding to the disorder, in many instances, has been a significant upsurge in armed banditry and criminal violence.

The importance of this “failed state syndrome” in the 1990s can hardly be overstated. With so many societies in disarray, the very nature of conflict has been transformed—from traditional combat between nation-states to inter-communal conflict within states. Such strife typically involves a wide variety of actors, including governments, rebel movements, armed political militias, ethnic and religious groups, tribes and clans, expatriate and diaspora groups, and criminal gangs and mercenaries. Common distinguishing characteristics of this type of intra-state conflict include multiple warring parties, blurred lines of conflict, greater involvement of civilians, and the fact that the conflict itself is not fought on traditional battlegrounds but in local communities; indeed, within society itself. The resentments and hatreds bred by such conflicts often divide nations, communities, and even families for years after the fighting itself has ceased.

Also characteristic of these conflicts is the presence among the warring parties of irregular and paramilitary forces with little or no formal military training and few compunctions about violating the rules of war. Such forces are often motivated by political or religious extremism, by loyalty to a government or political party that is unrepresentative of the nation at large, or by a sheer will to survive in a landscape of poverty and hopelessness. All too often, it is children and teenagers who are recruited (or dragooned) into these organizations—and then forced to kill, loot, and rampage.¹

Closely related to this is another defining characteristic of such conflict: the fact that widespread death and suffering result not from the major conventional weapons traditionally associated with war—tanks, aircraft, warships, and so on—but from small arms and light weapons. The global proliferation of assault rifles, machine guns, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and other “man-portable” weapons has increased both the frequency and intensity of conflict in many divided societies and has greatly complicated the task of restoring the peace. Such weapons are readily obtainable on international markets, both legal and illicit, and are easily mastered by untrained and unprofessional soldiers, including children. In the period from 1989 to 1996, for instance, there were ninety-five internal conflicts around the world, with small arms and light weapons being the dominant weapons used in these conflicts.²

It has long been assumed by military analysts that small arms and light weapons play a relatively insignificant role in warfare, with the dominant role reserved for major

¹ On the use of child soldiers by the Lord's Resistance Army of Uganda, see Elizabeth Rubin, “Our Children Are Killing Us,” *The New Yorker* (March 23, 1998), pp. 56-66. For background on the types and motivations of forces engaged in ethnic and sectarian conflicts, see Human Rights Watch, *Slaughter Among Neighbors* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

² Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg, “Armed Conflicts, Conflict Termination and Peace Agreements, 1989-1996,” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 34, no. 3.

weapons systems. This was certainly the case during World Wars I and II, the Korean War, and several Arab-Israeli wars. In the internal wars of the 1990s, however, armies equipped with light weapons alone have disabled governments, shattered economies, terrorized populations, and forced millions of people to abandon their homes and villages. Since 1990, the suffering caused by these conflicts has resulted in the deaths of more than 4 million people, while also producing 20 million refugees and 24 million displaced persons.

From Bosnia to Zaire, Rwanda to Afghanistan, and Tajikistan to Liberia, the resources of the international community are being overwhelmed as millions of people find themselves caught up in bitter conflicts, large-scale refugee movements, and even genocide. In response to these disasters, the international community has spent tens of billions of dollars on emergency relief, refugee care and resettlement, peacekeeping, and direct military intervention. For the United Nations alone, the annual cost of humanitarian assistance and relief for war victims has increased ten-fold, from about \$300 million a year in the 1980s to \$3 billion a year in the mid-1990s.

In seeking to cope with the tremendous demands of this new landscape of conflict, international organizations, national governments, non-governmental organizations, and the research community have struggled to understand the dynamics of failed states and divided societies. In particular, attention has come to focus on the ways in which the increased availability of low-cost small arms and light weapons contributes to the likelihood, intensity, and duration of armed conflict within states. Although these conflicts often possess deep and complex roots, it is evident that the widespread availability of modern light weapons has emboldened belligerents to pursue their objectives on the battlefield rather than at the bargaining table.

The analysis of contemporary warfare also reveals that such conflict overwhelmingly takes place in the world's poorest countries. Unlike the two World Wars, which largely involved industrial nations, the conflicts of the 1990s occur where poverty is greatest: of the sixty least-developed countries in the world, thirty have experienced conflict directly, while another twelve had to support large refugee populations from neighboring countries in conflict.³

This correlation between conflict and poverty helps to explain why these conflicts are generally fought with (relatively) cheap small arms and light weapons. It also explains why the victims of these conflicts are so dependent on assistance from the international community. More important over the longer term is the question of whether such countries will be able to successfully escape the conflict-poverty trap and begin to implement the economic and social reconstruction programs that are needed to end the cycle of violence that has been facilitated by the large numbers of cheap and easily available light weapons.

³ Steven Holtzman, "Post-Conflict Reconstruction" (World Bank, Environment Department, work in progress, 1996), p. 1.

SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

During the forty-five years of the Cold War (1945-1990), the preoccupation with major conventional weapons precluded much thought about other weapons that, in more recent times, have been primarily responsible for the deaths of soldiers and civilians in war. Despite the tremendous destructive power of modern aircraft, tanks, warships, and missiles, more people have been killed by small arms and light weapons in recent wars than by major weapons systems.⁴ Such weapons—assault rifles, machine guns, hand grenades, shoulder-fired rockets, and light mortars—have proved themselves particularly well suited to the ethnic and internal conflicts of the post-Cold War era. The distinguishing features of small arms and light weapons that make them so suitable to contemporary intra-state conflicts include the following:

Low Cost and Wide Availability: Because the production of small arms and light weapons requires little in the way of sophisticated technology and because these weapons are manufactured for military, police, and civilian use, there are numerous suppliers around the world. In addition, the existence of many tens of millions of such weapons—whether newly produced, given away by downsizing militaries, or recycled from conflict to conflict—leads to bargain-basement prices in many areas globally.

Lethality: The increasing sophistication and lethality of rapid-fire assault rifles, automatic pistols, and submachine guns, and their diffusion to non-state actors, has given such groups a firepower that often matches or exceeds that of national police or constabulary forces. With such weapons capable of firing up to three hundred rounds a minute, a single individual can pose a tremendous threat to society.⁵ The incorporation of new technology into shoulder-fired rockets, mortars, and light anti-tank weapons has only increased the firepower that warring factions can bring to bear in civil conflicts.

Simplicity and Durability: Small arms are easy to use and maintain, require little maintenance or logistical support, and remain operational for many years. Such weapons require little training to use effectively, which greatly increases their use in conflicts involving untrained combatants and children.

Portability and Concealability: Small arms and light weapons can be carried by an individual soldier or light vehicle, are easily transported or smuggled to areas of conflict, and can be concealed in shipments of legitimate cargo.

Military/Police and Civilian Uses: Unlike major conventional weapons, which are most often procured solely by national military forces, small arms and light weapons cross the dividing line separating military and police forces from the civilian population. Depending on the gun-control laws of a particular country, citizens are permitted to own anything from pistols and sporting guns to fully automatic rifles. In many countries, moreover, there has been a dramatic increase in the number and size of private militias and security firms—many equipped with military-type weapons.

⁴ At least in World War II, the same cannot be said for civilians, subject as they were to carpet bombing raids (Coventry, Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo) and the use of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nonetheless, small arms and light weapons were certainly responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of civilians.

⁵ Some of the more horrific examples in recent years have been the killing of 29 Palestinians at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron in 1994, the murder of 35 people at the Tasmanian tourist resort of Port Arthur, and the killing of 17 school children and adults in Dunblane, Scotland.

All of these characteristics of light weapons have made them particularly attractive to the sort of paramilitary and irregular forces that have played such a prominent role in recent conflicts. These forces have limited financial and technical means, lack professional military training, and often must operate in remote and inaccessible areas—conditions that favor the use of small arms and light weapons. At the same time, many states have increased their purchases of small arms and light weapons for use in counterinsurgency campaigns against ethnic and political insurgents and to suppress domestic opposition movements. The government of Mexico, for instance, was reported to have bought millions of dollars worth of counterinsurgency equipment after the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, while the Colombian government has sought similar equipment for operations against leftist guerrillas and narcotics traffickers.

THE GLOBAL DIFFUSION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

For many years, the global trade in major conventional weapons has been well documented by such organizations as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, and, more recently, the United Nations (through its Register of Conventional Arms). The sale or transfer of these weapons in the 1970s and 1980s, primarily from the members of NATO and the Warsaw Pact to their respective allies in the developing world, was fairly easy to monitor in terms of both trade flows and dollar amounts. By comparison, the global trade in small arms and light weapons has proved much more difficult to track. Few national governments publish statistics on the sale or transfer of light weapons, or release information about the sales activities of private companies. Moreover, much of the trade—perhaps 25 percent—is carried on through illicit and black-market channels of one sort or another.

In the absence of uniform statistics on the trade in small arms and light weapons, researchers must rely on anecdotal information and what little fragmentary data is available from government and trade sources. Fairly reliable estimates of the global trade in such weapons range between \$5 billion and \$7 billion a year, with some estimates running as high as \$10 billion a year.⁶ And while official statistics indicate that the trade in major weapons systems has fallen sharply with the end of the Cold War, many analysts believe that global transfers of light weapons have increased during this period.

The global spread of small arms and light weapons has been facilitated by the emergence in many countries—including a dozen or so countries in the developing world—of a domestic capacity for the manufacture of such weapons. Whereas the fabrication of major weapons systems is highly concentrated, with only a dozen or so capable of producing modern tanks, planes, and warships, some fifty nations now manufacture light weapons and/or ammunition of various types. The production of modern assault rifles, for example, occurs in many of the industrialized nations as well as in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Mexico, Pakistan, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Taiwan, and Turkey.⁷ Many of these countries produce arms for export as well as for domestic use, greatly adding to the number of sources from which a potential belligerent can obtain weapons of war.

The large number of production sites also contributes to the expansion of national arsenals and to the spread of arms within societies via theft, bribery, and corruption. Indeed, the multiplicity of trade channels leads to a natural distinction between the proliferation of major weapons systems and the diffusion of light weapons. To elaborate: While proliferation suggests the transfer of major weapons from a handful of producing states to a growing number of recipient states, diffusion suggests the dispersion of arms within societies—extending not only to governments and state-owned entities but also to private armies and militias, insurgent groups, criminal organizations, and other non-state actors.⁸ Accordingly, analyses of the trade in light

⁶ Keith Krause, "Constraining Conventional Arms Proliferation: A Model for Canada," in *Multilateral Approaches to Non-Proliferation*, ed. Andrew Latham (Toronto: York University, 1996), p. 57.

⁷ Michael Klare and David Andersen, *A Scourge of Guns: The Diffusion of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Latin America* (Washington, DC: Federation of American Scientists, 1996), p. 17.

⁸ Michael Klare, "Light Weapons Diffusion and Global Violence in the Post-Cold War Era," in *Light Weapons and International Security*, ed. Jasjit Singh (Delhi: Indian Pugwash Society and British American Security Information Council, 1995), p. 3.

weapons must take into account not only a sharp increase in the number of producers and suppliers, but also how these weapons are being transferred to an ever expanding array of states and non-state actors in every region of the world.

The following list of the various legal, covert, and illegal ways in which small arms and light weapons are sold, transferred, and exchanged around the world points to the complexity of the problem:⁹

- Grants or gifts by governments to allied governments abroad;
- Sales by governments to client governments abroad;
- Commercial sales by private firms to governments and private dealers in other countries;
- Technology transfers associated with domestic arms production in the developing nations;
- Covert transfers by governments to friendly insurgent and separatist groups in other countries;
- Gifts by governments to armed militias and paramilitary organizations linked to the ruling party or the dominant ethnic group;
- Black-market sales to the governments of “pariah” countries and to insurgent and separatist forces;
- Theft of government and privately owned arms by insurgent, criminal, and separatist forces;
- Exchanges between insurgent and criminal organizations, whether for profit or in pursuit of common political objectives.

Although it is impossible to discuss each of these methods in detail, it is useful to look briefly at the major channels.

Legal Channels

Currently, there are over three hundred manufacturers of light weapons, ammunition, and related equipment in fifty countries around the world, a 25 percent increase in the last decade alone.¹⁰ Through World War II, the major producers of these weapons were the industrialized nations, including not only the United States, Russia, Germany, France, and Britain, but also other European countries such as Belgium, Austria, Sweden, Switzerland, and Italy. In recent decades, these established producers have been joined by China, Israel, South Africa, and many states in the developing world. Estimates of just some of the more common models produced by these countries in the past few decades show the enormity of the problem: The Belgian FAL assault rifle (5-7 million produced in fifteen countries), Soviet/Russian AK assault rifles (35-50 million by Soviet/Russian factories and licensees), the German Heckler & Koch G3 assault rifle (7 million in eighteen countries), the U.S. M-16 rifle (8 million in seven countries), and Chinese AK-type assault rifles (6 million).¹¹

In addition to all of the newly manufactured weapons being sold on the international market, millions of surplus arms have been sold or given away as the world’s major

⁹ Klare, “Light Weapons Diffusion and Global Violence in the Post-Cold War Era,” p. 8.

¹⁰ Swadesh Rana, *Small Arms and Intra-State Conflicts* (New York: United Nations, 1995), p. 4.

¹¹ Virginia Hart Ezell, “Small Arms,” *National Defense* (January 1995).

military powers have reduced their forces and/or found themselves with excess production capacity following the end of the Cold War. Unlike major weapons systems such as aircraft, missiles, and tanks, which require regular upkeep and maintenance to remain operable, small arms and light weapons have few moving parts and are extremely durable. Hence, even weapons that are ten to twenty years old are often fully operational and as effective as newly produced weapons. Accordingly, countries such as the United States, Russia, and Germany (especially with the dismantling of the East German army) have been able to sell or transfer millions of small arms and light weapons to their allies and clients abroad.

Covert and “Gray-Market” Channels

In addition to legal sales and military assistance programs, small arms and light weapons are disseminated through covert and “gray-market” channels (that is, channels that operate with government support even though in violation of official government policy), most often by government intelligence agencies and/or private companies linked to such agencies. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) helped to supply some three million AK-47 assault rifles (mainly Chinese and Egyptian models) to rebel mujahideen; thousands of these weapons have since turned up in fighting in Kashmir and elsewhere in South Asia, and as far away as Southeast Asia and the Middle East.¹² The Soviet KGB supplied arms to rebel groups in Central America and elsewhere, while both the United States and Soviet Union supplied massive amounts of weapons to various factions in Angola and Mozambique.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States and Russia have discontinued many of these activities, but it is widely believed that military commanders and managers of military factories in Russia and some of the other newly independent states of the former Soviet Union have engaged in large-scale covert sales of weapons to clients in neighboring states and beyond. Government officials in other countries have also been accused of smuggling arms to allied groups in other countries, whether for profit or to advance particular political or religious objectives. Officials in Zaire, for instance, reportedly bought large quantities of weapons on the international market and sold them to the rebel forces of UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) in Angola for profits running into the hundreds of millions of dollars—most of which is believed to have wound up in the overseas bank accounts of former President Mobutu Sese Seko and his associates.¹³

Another form of gray-market transfer entails the delivery of weapons from government stockpiles to political entities and ethnic militias associated with the ruling clan or party. Prior to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, for instance, the Hutu-dominated government distributed small arms and machetes to government-linked Interahamwe militias. Once the killing began, the Rwandan military sought to crush any organized Tutsi resistance while the militias slaughtered unarmed Tutsis and moderate Hutus.¹⁴ A similar pattern was evident in Haiti in the early 1990s, when the ruling military junta organized and armed the bloodthirsty FRAPH (Front for the Advancement and Progress of Haiti) to suppress popular support for ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

¹² Chris Smith, “Light Weapons and Ethnic Conflict in South Asia,” in *Lethal Commerce: The Global Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons*, Boutwell et al. (Cambridge: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1995), pp. 61-80.

¹³ “Zaire reportedly selling arms to Angolan ex-rebels,” *Washington Post* (March 21, 1997), p. A1.

¹⁴ See Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Rwanda: The Planning and Execution of Mass Murder* (Washington, DC: Human Rights Watch/Africa, July 1996).

Illicit and Black-Market Channels

The third major category of light-weapons transfers includes illegal sales through black-market channels, the supply of arms in defiance of international embargoes and other legal sanctions, and the theft of arms from government stocks or private citizens. In recent years, there has been a striking growth in the operations of black-market dealers to satisfy the needs of non-state actors in ethnic and internal conflicts. Because such actors are normally barred from purchases on the legal munitions market, they must acquire their weaponry from illicit sources. The growing number of UN arms embargoes has also produced an increased demand for black-market arms. Although it is impossible to estimate the full worldwide scale of such transactions, some estimates place 1993 black-market sales to the belligerents in Bosnia at \$2 billion or more.

The black-market trade has been facilitated by the existence of vast stockpiles of surplus arms in the states of the former Soviet bloc—arms which in many cases are guarded by near-destitute soldiers and officers who are only all too eager to conspire in their theft by black-market dealers, or to enter the illicit trade themselves.¹⁵ All over the world, moreover, there are strong linkages between the illegal narcotics trade and black-market arms trafficking. These underground networks have developed sophisticated methods for the procurement, transportation, and sale of small arms and light weapons to willing buyers, at times with the connivance of governments or corrupt public officials.

Finally, theft of weapons from military and police warehouses is a major problem in countries afflicted by civil war or insurgent violence. When civil strife spread across Albania in the spring of 1997, for instance, thousands of weapons were looted by insurgents, criminals, and civilians from military depots. These weapons not only increased the levels of armed violence in Albania but reportedly were also being smuggled across the border into the Serbian province of Kosovo, where two million ethnic Albanians pose an irredentist challenge to Serbian authority.¹⁶ In South Africa and Colombia, moreover, stolen weapons contribute to a culture of violence and criminality that undermines the stability of the state and the cohesion of society.

As this brief survey demonstrates, the challenges posed by the diffusion of small arms and light weapons are far more complex than those posed by the sale of major weapons systems. While major weapons normally remain in the hands of regular government forces and are rarely used except in cases of external attack, light weapons are dispersed throughout society and are used on a regular basis. Such weapons are also capable of producing widespread death and destruction, even in countries that rank relatively low on traditional indices of “militarization.”¹⁷

All of this is especially evident in sub-Saharan Africa, where transfers of major weapons dropped significantly at the end of the Cold War—plummeting from \$3.64 billion in 1983 to \$240 million in 1993. Traditional analyses of the relationship between arms transfers and military behavior would predict a reduction in tension and conflict during this period, yet ethnic and internal strife devastated a number of African states, including Angola, Burundi, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda. Due to the paucity of data on transfers of small arms and light weapons, and because standard indices of militarism focus on major weapons and organized military units, traditional analyses generally exclude both the weapons and the privately armed groups that are responsible for much of the fighting and slaughter that occurs in civil and ethnic strife.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ksenia Gonchar and Peter Lock, “Small Arms and Light Weapons: Russia and the Former Soviet Union,” in *Lethal Commerce: The Global Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons*, Boutwell et al.

¹⁶ “Albania is suddenly awash with guns,” *Boston Globe* (March 19, 1997).

¹⁷ Joseph Smaldone, “Military Burden, Conflict and Arms Control in Sub-Saharan Africa: Puzzles, Paradoxes, and Prescriptions,” paper presented at the 38th annual meeting of the African Studies Association (Orlando, FL: November 3–5, 1997), pp. 6–7. According to five indices of militarization devised by Smaldone for 144 countries around the world, countries such as Rwanda (124), Liberia (105), Somalia (92), and Sudan (113) ranked very low (in 1985), yet experienced devastating internal conflicts (table 1).

¹⁸ Smaldone, “Military Burden,” pp. 6–7.

THE HUMANITARIAN PROBLEM

The diffusion of small arms and light weapons in societies being torn apart by ethnic and sectarian strife is producing a humanitarian disaster of immense proportions. Of greatest concern is the fact that so many victims of these conflicts are non-combatants. Given the very nature of these internal wars, it is not surprising that civilians are both the overwhelming victims (sometimes as high as 90 percent of all casualties), and often the specific targets, of such conflicts.¹⁹

Over and above the fact that civilians are often caught in the middle of today's intra-state wars—with members of certain ethnic and religious groups targeted for systematic slaughter or ethnic cleansing—the spread of increasingly lethal small arms and light weapons has elevated the death toll of recent conflicts. The high rates of fire of modern assault rifles and the indiscriminate effects of grenades and light mortars (whether used in cities, towns, or villages) have resulted in appalling rates of casualties for both civilians and combatants.

The dimensions of the problem go beyond civilians as such to include growing numbers of children—both as combatants and as victims. Children under eighteen were reported to be participating directly in armed hostilities—whether as part of government forces, the opposition, or both—in thirty-six countries where conflict was ongoing or had just ended in 1995.²⁰ The use of such children as combatants is made all the easier by the widespread availability of small arms, especially rapid-fire automatic weapons that require scant training to use and little precision in aiming.

A second humanitarian problem is that of ensuring adequate medical care to those wounded or injured in intra-state conflicts. As horrific as war has been, international standards have been developed since the late nineteenth century regulating the treatment of the dead and wounded on the battlefield.²¹ Yet the fluid and chaotic nature of ethnic conflict, and the difficulty of distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants, has made the provision of medical care much more difficult. In addition, the disruption of public health is often a specific aim of warring parties, with combatants targeting hospitals, electrical plants, water and food supplies, and other forms of infrastructure needed for the provision of medical care to the sick and wounded.²² As a consequence, mortality rates for those wounded in battle or injured as an indirect result of combat are often very high. Compounding the problem is the fact that the irregular and paramilitary forces found in so many of today's conflicts are often unfamiliar with (or openly contemptuous of) the rules of war, and in any case do not possess the sort of modern medical equipment that is normally carried by regular military forces.

Another problem stemming from the diffusion of small arms and light weapons in areas of conflict is the fact that the UN peacekeepers sent in to quell such strife are often themselves exposed to fire by one or more of the factions involved. In Somalia, for instance, U.S. and UN peacekeepers repeatedly came under small-arms fire in 1992-1995 while attempting to put an end to clan warfare in Mogadishu. More than

¹⁹ Victor W. Sidel, M.D., "The International Arms Trade and Its Impact on Health," *British Medical Journal* (December 23, 1995).

²⁰ Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, *Children: The Invisible Soldiers* (Stockholm: Swedish Save the Children, 1996), pp. 28-29.

²¹ For a good overview of the role of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) especially, see Michael Ignatieff, "Unarmed Warriors," *The New Yorker* (March 24, 1997).

²² "The Medical Profession and the Effects of Weapons," Symposium of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Montreux, 8-10 March 1996 (Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross, 1996), p. 11.

ninety U.S. and UN soldiers were killed in firefights—often by light weapons that the U.S. government had supplied to the former Somali regime of Mohammed Siad Barre in the 1980s.²³

The dangers posed by the spread of small arms and light weapons throughout the world are also an increasingly significant issue for humanitarian aid workers and other relief personnel working in areas of conflict. In 1994, at the height of the fighting in Rwanda, thirty-six Red Cross workers were killed in the combat area, in many cases deliberately. In 1996, three Red Cross staff traveling in their clearly marked Land Cruiser were murdered in Burundi, and six Red Cross personnel were murdered in their beds in a Red Cross compound in Chechnya.²⁴ By comparison, from 1942 to 1990, the total number of international Red Cross workers killed in conflict situations was fifteen.²⁵

One result of the growing scale and complexity of emergency humanitarian relief operations in areas of conflict is that international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) find themselves able to focus less and less on long-term development projects. The same is true for national and international aid programs. In the period from 1991 to 1996, international development aid declined from \$62 billion annually to \$50 billion, while short-term humanitarian assistance has increased from 1.5 percent of all aid in 1991 to an estimated 10 percent in 1996.²⁶ Faced with the overwhelming demand for immediate relief for those wounded and displaced by conflict, many NGOs and aid organizations are shifting away from development activities entirely. Instead of seeking funds for long-term development work, they are concentrating on building up reserve funds in order to respond quickly when conflict flares up, before there are large numbers of refugees and other victims of war. While such strategies certainly meet a demonstrable need, they also reduce the availability of funds for long-term development assistance.

Confronted with a growing threat to their field-workers and the mounting scale of the worldwide humanitarian crisis, many aid and relief organizations are reviewing basic strategy and adopting new priorities. In some cases, this may mean the scaling back of aid missions in particularly hazardous areas. But some groups, including Oxfam International, are also studying how they can contribute to the growing call for multilateral constraints on the global trade in small arms and light weapons. In a statement issued on the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, Oxfam not only advocated expanding the UN Arms Register to include light weapons, but also recommended that “[g]overnments, through the UN, should agree to an enforceable code of conduct on international arms transfers, to reduce the flow of arms where they are likely to cause civilian suffering.”²⁷

²³ See *Managing Arms in Peace Processes: Somalia*, Clement Adibe, principal author (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 1995), one of several country case studies carried out by the UNIDIR Disarmament and Conflict Resolution Project.

²⁴ Ignatieff, “Unarmed Warriors,” pp. 61–62.

²⁵ “Relief agencies face new realities,” *Boston Globe* (January 26, 1997).

²⁶ *The Economist* (June 22, 1996), pp. 49, 52.

²⁷ The Oxfam statement noted that “[t]he UN Charter sets out the right of every state to defend itself. This is not in doubt; and indeed, with the decline in inter-state and increase in intra-state conflict, has become a less and less relevant question. The increasing cause for concern is that, partly because of this changing nature of conflict, arms are now primarily used by governments and rebel organizations against civilians, who constitute 84 percent of the dead in today’s wars.” See Oxfam Briefing, “The UN’s 50th Anniversary: An Opportunity to Reduce Conflicts,” no. 8 (13 January 1995), pp. 14–15.

THE GROWING CALL FOR POLICY INITIATIVES

It is clear, from all of the above, that the unchecked flow of small arms and light weapons to areas of conflict represents a significant threat to world peace and security. While it cannot be said that such weapons are a primary *cause* of conflict, their worldwide availability, low cost, and ease of operation make it relatively easy for potential belligerents of all kinds to initiate and sustain deadly conflict. The widespread diffusion of such weapons throughout society—especially in areas still recovering from armed conflict—also contributes to the incidence and intensity of criminal violence. These factors have greatly complicated (and in some cases undermined) efforts by the international community to restore the peace in areas of conflict and to deliver emergency humanitarian assistance to the victims of war.

Accordingly, policy-makers have begun to highlight the need for new international controls in this area. In a January 1995 message to the UN Security Council, then Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali declared, “Progress since 1992 in the area of [controlling] weapons of mass destruction and major weapons systems must be followed by parallel progress in conventional arms, particularly with respect to light weapons.” Similar views have been expressed by Kofi Annan, Boutros-Ghali’s successor as UN Secretary-General. “With regard to conventional weapons,” he told the Conference on Disarmament in January 1998, “there is a growing awareness among Member States of the urgent need to adopt measures to reduce the transfer of small arms and light weapons. It is now incumbent on all of us to translate this shared awareness into decisive action.”

Interest in the trade in small arms and light weapons has also been spurred by a growing number of national and international NGOs. These include many groups with a background in arms control and human rights, such as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Amnesty International, the British-American Security Information Council (BASIC), the Federation of American Scientists, Human Rights Watch, and Saferworld, as well as prominent humanitarian aid and relief organizations. These NGOs—many of which played a key role in the international campaign to ban land mines—have conducted ground-breaking research on the trade in light weapons and have begun to lobby governments for vigorous action in this field. Along with UN officials and leaders of interested governments, these groups have also led the search for new policy prescriptions.

Before turning to a discussion of the policy initiatives that have emerged out of this effort, it is important to review the work that has already been done at the national, regional, and international level to focus attention on the light-weapons trade and to lay the groundwork for effective solutions.

International Efforts

In line with the increased attention being focused by the international community on the dangers posed by small arms and light weapons, the United Nations has been engaged in a wide variety of activities to both publicize the problem and initiate steps toward policy controls. The two major efforts undertaken by the United Nations in this area are the study conducted by the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms in 1996 and 1997, analyzing the types of weapons used in contemporary conflicts and the nature and causes of their excessive accumulation; and the parallel study of member states' firearm regulations conducted by the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) in the same two-year period. A new UN body, the Group of Governmental Experts on Small Arms, was established in 1998 to review the work of the earlier panel and to make further recommendations for curbing the trade in light weapons. Also, in April 1998, the CCPCJ adopted a resolution that calls on UN member states "to combat the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking of firearms, their parts and components, and ammunition within the context of a United Nations convention against organized crime." Such a convention (which has the backing of the United States) is expected to be signed in 1999 or 2000.

Operationally, the United Nations has sought to monitor the effectiveness of various international embargoes on the transfer of weaponry into areas of conflict. In 1996, a UN International Commission of Inquiry on Rwanda investigated the implementation of the UN arms embargo on Rwanda, paying particular attention to specific allegations of embargo violations. In their report, members of the Commission noted that "[we] could not fail to note the absence of an effective, proactive mechanism to monitor or implement the arms embargo the Security Council had imposed on Rwanda."²⁸ Elsewhere in Africa, the United Nations has supported Mali's path-breaking efforts to collect and destroy firearms internally and to support a regional moratorium on the trade in small arms and light weapons, adopted by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1998.

Other international organizations are also becoming involved in the light-weapons issue, particularly as it relates to issues of economic and human development. The World Bank, for instance, is devoting resources to issues of post-conflict reconstruction, particularly in regard to the demobilization of combatants and their reintegration into civil society. Also, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), through its task force on Conflict, Peace, and Development Cooperation, is putting greater emphasis on the need for "timely prevention measures" (such as limiting arms flows in areas of potential conflict) in order to forestall armed violence.²⁹

Regional Efforts

Particularly in Africa and the Americas, national governments and regional organizations are devising a variety of measures to better regulate the legal trade in light weapons and to combat illicit weapons trafficking. In November 1997, the Organization of American States (OAS) signed a Convention on the illicit weapons trade that calls for standardization of national firearms regulations and increased law enforcement and customs cooperation to prevent illicit weapons flows within the Western Hemisphere. Within the Caribbean sub-region, moreover, Jamaica has

²⁸ UN report in response to Security Council Resolution 1013, pp. 18-19.

²⁹ See Development Assistance Committee of the OECD, *Guidelines on Conflict, Peace and Development*, DCD/DAC (96) 31/REV3 (April 17, 1997), p. 11.

proposed that similar efforts be undertaken by the fourteen-member Caribbean Community (Caricom).

In West Africa, as noted earlier, the members of ECOWAS have adopted a regional moratorium on the import, export, and manufacture of light weapons. In Central Africa, the United Nations has established a trust fund coordinated by an eleven-member Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa, with which to remove small arms and light weapons from the region. Similarly, the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) has recommended the establishment of a regional database on stolen firearms and the implementation of multilateral police operations to recover such weapons.

Among the European countries, there are increased pressures for controlling both legal and illegal shipments of weapons. The European Union (EU) in June 1997 agreed to an EU Programme for Preventing and Combating Illicit Trafficking in Conventional Arms. Also, in 1998, the EU adopted a Code of Conduct that imposes rigorous standards on the legal sale and shipment of small arms and light weapons to other countries, particularly to countries experiencing civil strife and human rights abuses.

National Efforts

Under pressure from citizen groups, national governments in many countries are taking steps to increase transparency in the light-weapons trade and to tighten controls on the production, sale, and ownership of small arms. In the United States, for instance, Congress (under Section 655 of the Foreign Assistance Act) has mandated the publication of a detailed annual report on U.S. arms transfers to foreign countries. In response to complaints from Mexico, moreover, the United States has cracked down on illicit gun trafficking on the U.S.-Mexican border and has agreed to stronger export controls in the context of the OAS Convention described earlier. Similar efforts are under way in a number of other states, including Colombia, South Africa, and the EU states.

In many communities, municipal authorities and non-governmental organizations have begun grassroots campaigns to remove small arms from circulation at the local level and to pressure their national governments to take the light-weapons problem more seriously. In South Africa, such initiatives involve bringing various ethnic and tribal groups together to deal with the “culture of violence” plaguing that country. In countries like Britain and Australia that have experienced horrific massacres carried out by automatic weapons—notably the 1996 killings in Dunblane, Scotland; and Port Arthur, Tasmania—national groups have come together to lobby for more restrictive gun control laws. Elsewhere, NGOs and grassroots organizations have put the spotlight on their own governments’ responsibility for supplying weapons to areas of conflict and persistent human rights abuse.

Prompted in part by this growing activity on the part of non-governmental organizations, representatives of twenty-one national governments (including the United States) gathered in July 1998 in Oslo, Norway, and issued a statement urging more stringent controls on the legal and illicit sale and supply of small arms and light weapons. This was followed on October 12 and 13, 1998, by an international conference in Brussels, “Sustainable Disarmament for Sustainable Development,”

attended by several hundred representatives of national governments and non-governmental organizations. The conference concluded with the adoption of “The Brussels Call for Action,” which outlined a wide range of measures for tackling the threat posed by the uncontrolled proliferation of light weapons to civil society and human development.

Clearly, these are but the first steps in what must be a vigorous, long-term effort to impose effective international controls on the trade in small arms and light weapons. Given the complexity of these issues and the reluctance of many states to curb their own arms exports, adopting such controls will not be easy. But much has been learned from the efforts already under way, and it is now possible to identify the sort of measures that will be needed to ensure effective control over this trade.

THE NEED FOR NEW POLICY INITIATIVES

From all that has been learned about the international trade in small arms and light weapons, it is evident that no single set of policy initiatives will suffice to deal with this problem. Unlike the relative simplicity of the land-mines issue—where the international community could focus on one particular weapon (anti-personnel land mines) and recommend its total elimination—the effort to control the diffusion of light weapons will demand a host of initiatives, extending to the local, regional, national, and international levels. These initiatives must extend not only to the illicit trade, moreover, but also cover the legal weapons trade that results in tens and hundreds of thousands of light weapons being sold or given away each year.

Ultimately, what is needed is the establishment of a multi-layered regime covering the international transfer and diffusion of small arms and light weapons, similar to the existing regimes covering nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Such a regime should consist of an overlapping series of national, regional, and international control measures designed to screen out illicit transfers and narrow the allowable scope for legal sales. None of these measures would be sufficient by itself to achieve this purpose, but would work in conjunction with the other controls to sharply limit the global flow of firearms.

Accordingly, the following initiatives represent a rough menu of the sort of steps that will be needed to subject light-weapons transfers to greater international scrutiny and to reduce the flow of such munitions to areas of conflict.

ESTABLISHING INTERNATIONAL NORMS

The first, and perhaps most important, step is to adopt international norms against the uncontrolled and destabilizing transfer of small arms and light weapons to areas of tension and conflict. Although deference must be made to the traditional right of sovereign states to arm themselves in the face of overwhelming threats to their survival, it must be made clear that this right has natural limits and does not extend to the acquisition of arms for the purpose of engaging in genocide or the suppression of opposition political or religious movements. It must become axiomatic, moreover, that the right to acquire arms for self defense entails an obligation to maintain such weapons under effective government control at all times and to preclude their diversion for illicit purposes.

While it may take some time to clarify and win support for such norms, the basic groundwork has been provided by the UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms. In its report, the Panel concludes that “[t]he excessive and destabilizing accumulation and transfer of small arms and light weapons is closely related to the increased incidence of internal conflicts and high levels of crime and violence,” and is, therefore, “an issue of legitimate concern for the international community.” With this in mind, the report calls on member states to “exercise restraint” with respect to the

transfer of small arms and light weapons and to take all necessary steps to prevent the diversion of government arms supplies into illegitimate hands.

Clearly, much work is needed to strengthen these norms and to promote their acceptance by governments. As in the worldwide campaign against land mines, the media can focus public attention on the dangers posed by such weapons, especially to civilians and children. The issue is admittedly complicated by the fact that, unlike anti-personnel land mines, national governments and military and police forces can demonstrate a far greater legitimate need for light weapons for purposes of self defense and national security. Nonetheless, the frequency with which such weapons are used in the indiscriminate killing of civilians and children points to a humanitarian aspect of small arms that is quite similar to that of land mines.

International norms could also be developed along the lines of the Geneva Conventions, where states would be prohibited from supplying light weapons to any government, group, or entity that does not have the resources to treat its wounded or those of the enemy, or has not trained its own personnel in the laws of war.³⁰ There is also scope for focusing public attention on particularly lethal aspects of light weapons. In the same way that international agreements (notably the 1980 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons) have been developed to constrain new technologies such as laser-blinding weapons and new types of ammunition (similar to the 1899 Hague Declaration concerning expanding bullets), public sentiment could be mobilized to support constraints on the introduction of other inhumane or indiscriminate weapons technologies.

Along the same lines, there is an urgent need for greater involvement on the part of the international medical community in helping to highlight the effects of small arms and light weapons as a public health issue. One effort currently under way at the International Committee of the Red Cross is an investigation of how traditional concepts of “superfluous injury” and “unnecessary suffering” might be applied to modern small arms and light weapons in order to impose prohibitions on their transfer and use.³¹ Finally, a group of Nobel Peace Prize laureates led by Oscar Arias have proposed an international “code of conduct” that would regulate the transfer of small arms and light weapons between states and prohibit their transfer to regimes that have engaged in warfare against elements of their own or neighboring populations or have been engaged in persistent violations of basic human rights.

INCREASED INTERNATIONAL TRANSPARENCY

At present, efforts to monitor and control the diffusion of small arms and light weapons are hampered by a lack of detailed information on the production, sale, and transportation of such munitions. Whereas considerable data on the trade in major conventional weapons is available from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and other organizations, no such data is available on the trade in light weapons. The UN Register of Conventional Weapons, established in 1993, covers major weapons only. At the national level, few governments provide detailed data on imports and exports of light weapons. This means that it is very difficult to measure the flow of such weapons from centers of production to recipients around the world.

³⁰ Robin M. Coupland, ICRC. At present, by denying that it is involved in an internal conflict (as defined by the 1949 Geneva Conventions or the 1977 Additional Protocols), a government can deny the applicability of international humanitarian law. See Brett, *Children: The Invisible Soldiers*, p. 17.

³¹ See Robin M. Coupland, “The effects of weapons: defining superfluous injury and unnecessary suffering,” *Medicine and Global Survival*, 3:A1 (1996). To cite one example, Dr. Georg Scharf has argued for a ban on mortar bombs, given their increasing use in civilian environments and to target medical facilities; see his “The effects of mortar bombs and similar weapons in limited conflicts,” a background paper for “The Medical Profession and the Effects of Weapons” International Committee of the Red Cross (1996).

Clearly, to ensure effective international oversight of the legal trade in small arms and light weapons, it will be necessary to promote greater transparency in this area. This will require effort at the national, regional, and international level. National governments should be required to publish detailed annual tallies of weapons imports and exports (such as that published in the United States in accordance with Section 655 of the Foreign Assistance Act), while regional arms registers covering small arms and light weapons should also be encouraged. Finally, at the international level, the UN Register of Conventional Weapons should be gradually extended to cover all types of munitions, including small arms and light weapons.

Enhanced international transparency is also necessary to curb the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. In the absence of an effective system of international transparency, it is relatively easy for illicit dealers to conceal their operations; but as information on the trade in light weapons becomes more widely available, it will become more and more difficult to do this. Increased transparency will also facilitate joint efforts by law enforcement agencies to identify, track, and apprehend black-market dealers.

INCREASED GOVERNMENTAL ACCOUNTABILITY

In the current international milieu, control over the import and export of small arms and light weapons rests with national governments; thus efforts to better regulate the trade in such munitions will be most effective at the level of the nation-state, not with regional or international organizations. Increased governmental accountability is needed in two key areas: First, the establishment of effective oversight over all military-type firearms found within the national territory, to prevent their diversion to criminal elements and black-market dealers; and second, strict controls over the import and export of such weapons, to preclude their use for any purpose other than legitimate self-defense as sanctioned by the UN Charter.

Efforts to accomplish the first of these objectives should be guided by the draft proposals of the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice. Specific measures would include a licensing system for manufacturers and gun owners, more effective identification systems to track firearms, more effective record keeping of firearms, and safe storage measures. An additional measure called for is the promotion of amnesty and weapons turn-in programs (such as the Australian buy-back effort that involved more than 600,000 firearms) that encourage citizens to surrender illegal, unsafe, unwanted, and excess weapons. Governments around the world should be encouraged to incorporate such measures into their national laws and regulations; those states that fail to do so should be barred from receiving arms from those states that do adopt such legislation.

Similarly, efforts to better control the import and export of small arms and light weapons should be guided by the recommendations found in the 1997 report of the UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms. These include the collection and destruction of weapons once conflict has ended, the destruction of surplus weapons no longer needed by a country's military or police forces (as opposed to selling or giving them away), and the exercise of restraint in exporting military and police weapons from one country to another.

States should also be encouraged to adopt a “code of conduct” for arms transfers such as those being considered at the regional (EU) and international level. Such codes would bar the sale or transfer of small arms and light weapons to any state that is ruled by a military dictatorship, that fails to respect the human rights of its citizens, that violates UN arms embargoes, and that cannot ensure the security of the weapons already in its possession.

ESTABLISH REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS FOR CONTROL

While priority should be given to the development of effective controls at the national level, efforts should also be made to establish systems of oversight and control at the regional and international levels. Action at the regional level is particularly important because small arms and light weapons are often circulated by regional networks of illicit dealers, insurgents, and permissive government agencies. Experience suggests, moreover, that it may be easier to mobilize political support for control systems at the regional level (as shown, for example, by the OAS Convention and the arms moratorium in West Africa) than at the international level.

At the regional level, policy initiatives could include agreements for the strengthening of import and export regulations, tougher enforcement of laws against illicit trafficking, and joint operations against black-market dealers. The OAS effort is one means of fostering increased cooperation between national customs services and law enforcement agencies on a regional basis. Other such efforts could be greatly facilitated if the wealthier countries, especially the United States and Japan, were to provide the requisite technologies for computer databases of suspected illicit weapons traffickers. In southern Africa, national governments and intelligence agencies are sharing information and mounting joint operations to uncover and destroy large caches of weapons left over from previous conflicts.

The ECOWAS moratorium on the manufacture, sale, and import of small arms and light weapons in West Africa is another initiative that can begin to reduce the easy availability of such weapons in society. As the first such initiative to arise within an area of persistent conflict, the ECOWAS moratorium might provide a model for other regions beset by political and social instability. This is especially the case in southern Africa, where the experience of countries such as South Africa and Mozambique demonstrated that the presence of even relatively modest numbers of light weapons ended up having horrific consequences for civilians caught in the middle of sectarian strife and criminal violence.

Other regional approaches include the establishment of regional “codes of conduct” on exports of arms, such as that adopted by the EU. Given the particularly troublesome black-market weapons activity coming out of Eastern Europe and the former republics of the Soviet Union (including Russia), thought should be given to the adoption of such codes by the OECD or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Economic incentive plans could be devised that would facilitate the closure of excess production capacity in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, or (as is happening with the U.S. purchase of excess Russian nuclear weapons material), Western states could buy surplus small arms and light weapons from former Warsaw Pact militaries and destroy them.

At the international level, emphasis should be placed on the adoption of measures needed to strengthen the implementation of weapons embargoes agreed to by the United Nations and associated bodies. While such embargoes may never be entirely leakproof, evidence has shown that even a modest number of international observers at airfields, seaports, and other points of entry for weapons to an area of conflict can make a difference. When supplemented by national controls on arms brokering, the trans-shipment of weapons, and stricter export controls, embargoes can make it far more difficult to deliver significant quantities of modern weapons to areas of conflict.

The major arms-supplying countries should also establish a mechanism, possibly as part of the Wassenaar Arrangement (a body established by the major industrial nations in 1995 to oversee international exports of conventional arms and high-tech goods), for consultation on arms flows to areas of current and potential conflict, along with provisions for the imposition of moratoria on weapons transfers to any state or region deemed to be at risk of ethnic slaughter, state failure, or genocide. Such moratoria should also provide for increased vigilance of black-market traffickers operating in the region in order to permit the swift apprehension of any dealers found to be in violation of international curbs on illicit arms trafficking. International inspectors should be sent to the region to ensure compliance with these measures and to suggest any other actions that might be taken to reduce the flow of arms and to promote the peaceful resolution of disputes.

REDUCE GLOBAL STOCKPILES OF SURPLUS WEAPONS

Much of the killing that has occurred in recent conflicts was carried out with small arms and light weapons left over from the Cold War era. In expectation of a prolonged and bitter conflict—a World War III—the two superpowers and their allies produced massive quantities of weapons of all types and stockpiled them in arsenals around the world. Some of these weapons were provided to friendly governments in the Third World, and some were smuggled to insurgent groups engaged in combat against governments linked to the opposing superpower. While a certain percentage of these weapons were lost or destroyed over time, vast numbers of them remain in working condition and are available for sale on the international market.

Addressing the problem of surplus weaponry is especially important, because many states—especially those in the former Soviet bloc—are eager to sell their excess stocks for hard currency with few or no questions asked. Moreover, because controls on the export of surplus arms are generally less strict than those on sales of newly manufactured weapons, black-market dealers generally find it easier to obtain and sell surplus arms than newly made weapons. The problem of surplus arms is also great in areas just recovering from armed conflict, where impoverished ex-combatants may try to sell their weapons for needed cash rather than turn them over to UN peacekeepers or other designated authorities.³²

Clearly, reducing global stockpiles of surplus munitions should be a critical component of any international effort to constrain the flow of small arms and light weapons. Such measures can take several forms. States that can afford to do so should agree to destroy the surplus arms and ammunition in their possession and to take the necessary steps to prevent the leakage of weaponry from government depots and

³² See Edward J. Laurance and Herbert Wulf, eds., *Coping with Surplus Weapons*, Brief no. 3 (Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion, 1995).

warehouses. As one example of the former, the Dutch Ministry of Defense announced in January 1998 that it would destroy most of its surplus small arms, including 115,000 Uzis, FAL rifles, Garand rifles, Browning pistols, and M-1 carbines.³³ Too often, however, such steps are the exception, not the rule.

In addition, the wealthier industrial states should create a “Nunn-Lugar” type fund to buy up and destroy the surplus stocks of the former Warsaw Pact countries and to help subsidize the security of their remaining stocks of weapons. (The Nunn-Lugar program, or “cooperative threat reduction,” is a U.S. effort to reduce the risk of nuclear proliferation from the ex-Soviet states by strengthening the safeguards on nuclear-weapons materials in these countries, and by helping to finance the destruction of warheads being deactivated in accordance with the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties [START].) Such assistance should be given in conjunction with assurances by these states to abide by new international constraints on the trade in small arms and light weapons, as described above.

The United States and Russia should also agree to cooperate in locating and reclaiming (or buying back) weapons given by them to insurgent groups during the Cold War era. In many areas, these weapons are now being used to fuel internal power struggles and criminal violence—usually with scant regard for the political objectives once espoused by the superpowers. Taking these weapons out of circulation would close one of the most deadly chapters of the Cold War and would help promote international peace and security in the current era.

DISARMING EX-COMBATANTS AND OTHER POST-CONFLICT DISARMAMENT MEASURES

A high priority should be placed on efforts to remove the large quantities of small arms and light weapons that often remain in a battle zone once a particular conflict has ended. Too often, the availability of such weapons facilitates either a renewal of the conflict (as in Angola) or the destabilization of efforts to build a peaceful civil society (as in South Africa). The limited success of disarmament programs in countries like El Salvador—which suffers from an appalling rate of criminal violence despite the collection of tens of thousands of weapons—points up the complexity and difficulty of such efforts.³⁴ Above all, decisions to disarm warring factions and remove small arms and light weapons from areas of conflict must be implemented uniformly and comprehensively.

Moreover, there are many societies around the world where the possession of weapons is deeply embedded in social mores, in which case arms collection efforts may prove futile or not be politically feasible. In such cases, and more generally as well, the primary emphasis should be on economic development and social reconstruction so that ex-combatants and civilians have viable options in the civilian economy. Nonetheless, policy options need to be explored that could combine weapons recovery and destruction programs, cross-border controls, and other measures to reduce the likelihood that small arms and light weapons will continue to be used in either armed conflict or civil violence. Recent initiatives on the part of the World Bank and a number of development and humanitarian NGOs to better integrate economic assistance programs with demobilization, the destruction of weapons, and other conflict-prevention strategies are a useful step in this direction.³⁵

³³ Saferworld, *Arms Bulletin*, no. 2 (January 6, 1998).

³⁴ In El Salvador, FMLN weapons were kept under lock and key, with FMLN commanders having one of the keys, in case the government reneged on its promise to demobilize soldiers and turn in weapons. The disarmament process carried out by ONUSAL in 1992-93 resulted in the collection and destruction from the FMLN of some 10,000 small arms and light weapons, 4 million rounds of ammunition, and over 9,000 grenades. In terms of dismantling the FMLN as a fighting force, reducing the size of El Salvador's military, and integrating former rebels into the military, the ONUSAL mission was a success. Nonetheless, criminal and civil violence continue to plague the country. See *Managing Arms in Peace Processes: Nicaragua and El Salvador*, Paulo S. Wrobel, principal author (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 1997).

³⁵ Holtzman, “Post-Conflict Reconstruction.”

INTERNATIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING

Ultimately, any regime for the control of international trafficking in small arms and light weapons will only be as effective as the weakest links in the system. So long as black-market dealers enjoy safe havens in which they can operate with impunity, it will be difficult or impossible to enforce tougher international standards on the trade in light weapons. Accordingly, it is essential that the stronger participants in the system assist the weaker elements to establish effective and reliable mechanisms for the oversight of arms imports and exports. Such efforts can be said to fall under the heading of international “capacity building.”

As part of such efforts, technology should be developed and installed on an international basis to help track the flows of small arms and light weapons, identify illicit sources of supply, and improve law enforcement and customs prosecution of illegal weapons suppliers and traders. In addition to developing computer databases and communications systems that can facilitate international cooperation on the light-weapons trade, several other initiatives have been proposed for helping to increase the transparency of light-weapons flows. The OAS, for instance, has proposed the marking and registration of weapons—both at the point of manufacture and when such weapons are legally exported. Such marking will make it easier for law enforcement and intelligence officials to trace the supply routes of weapons that may have been acquired legally and then were diverted to the black market. While some of these measures may prove difficult and expensive to implement, the international community has at least begun the process of thoroughly evaluating their potential utility.

CONCLUSION

By the end of 1998, there was increased international momentum for taking more decisive action to prevent the continuing global diffusion of small arms and light weapons. In addition to ongoing efforts on the part of the United Nations and regional organizations like the OAS, national governments—including Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Japan, Mexico, Norway, South Africa, and Switzerland—had signalled their interest in devoting substantial political and economic resources to deal with the problem. Moreover, the Clinton Administration has indicated its willingness to be fully involved in international efforts to dampen the light weapons trade. In August 1998, the Administration released a list of the various initiatives the U.S. government is pursuing—through the United Nations, the OAS, and at the national level—to support global efforts for combatting the threat posed by the unrestrained trade in light weapons.³⁶ (Most of these efforts were aimed at the illicit trade in arms, though some focused on legal transfers.)

Clearly, the United States and other governments, especially those responsible for the majority of light weapons production and supply, need to do more. At the moment, most countries, including the United States, are putting greater emphasis on the illicit light weapons trade. Yet, it is the continued supply of large amounts of small arms and light weapons to governments and non-state actors *through legal channels* that is most worrisome. All too often, supplier states continue to give away or sell at a discount hundreds or thousands of surplus light weapons that end up in the wrong hands.

In some cases, such as Somalia, these weapons are then used against U.S. peacekeeping forces that are sent to restore civil order. In other cases, such as Bosnia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, the United States and the international community will spend billions of dollars in peacekeeping and economic reconstruction when a more restrictive policy on light weapons transfers might have prevented or diminished the intensity of civil conflict in these countries.

As the international community is beginning to recognize, the humanitarian and development benefits of cutting the link between light weapons availability and civil conflict would be substantial. For the United States, the economic benefits of the light weapons trade are exceedingly minor compared to the ultimate costs of having to rescue “failed states,” provide for millions of refugees, and reconstruct societies torn apart by genocide and ethnic strife. The savings inherent in preventing or greatly limiting conflict in even one Rwanda, Bosnia, or Liberia would greatly outweigh the minimal political and economic benefits of being an indiscriminate light weapons supplier.

In sum, increased attention to the lethal effects of easily available small arms and light weapons on the part of humanitarian relief agencies, national governments, international organizations, and the media is translating into a greater public appreciation of the need to better control the production, supply, and diffusion of

³⁶ See U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), “Factsheet: ACDA Outlines U.S. Policy on Small Arms Issues” (Washington, DC: August 11, 1998).

these weapons. Admittedly, the problem is incredibly complex, and policies to control and regulate these weapons will not come easily. Nonetheless, the scale of death and injury caused by light weapons is such that the international community must continue to search for effective means of controlling and reducing the lethal commerce in small arms and light weapons around the world.