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Small arms and light weapons

Small arms and light weapons kill and maim hundreds of thousands of people every year. A UN action programme aims to check the illicit transfer of such arms. Since 2001, the Small Arms Survey yearbook has provided essential information on this subject.

Problem

Handguns, sub-machine guns and automatic weapons are light, easy to carry and to obtain by smuggling, easy to repair and to maintain. Even children can use them. Small arms and light weapons (see definition on back page) are very frequently used in intra-state conflicts and in organised crime. Every year they kill and maim hundreds of thousands of people, most of whom are civilians. The illicit transfer of such weapons endangers human security, prolongs and exacerbates conflicts, impedes aid to civilian populations and slows economic development.

Instruments of universal application

In July 2001, the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Their Aspects adopted an action programme which it is the responsibility of each country to implement. The main objectives are to control the exports of such weapons, to secure their storage, to mark them clearly and to register their transfer. Countries must also exchange information on trade in these weapons and comply with embargoes. In July 2006, a conference to review progress in the implementation was unable to specify certain aspects of the programme or to define the future direction of its work, thus disappointing the hopes of a large number of states.

In the same year, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition and Other Related Materials. This text is a legal instrument for combating the illicit trafficking of weapons that could benefit organised crime. Another important document was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 8 December 2005. This is an international instrument for the rapid and reliable identification and tracing of illicit light weapons. To this

end standards have been defined for marking and for registration as well as for international cooperation between states and between states, Interpol and the UN. For the first time ever in the framework of the United Nations, a definition of "small arms and light weapons" has been reached which is acceptable to all member states.

The actors

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) plays a key role in the fight against the proliferation of light weapons. It is responsible for disarming combatants and child soldiers and for reintegrating them in civil society, for preventing arms smuggling and for raising public awareness of these issues. Regional organisations such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) have also adopted normative or operational measures to combat the proliferation of illicit light weapons. So too have the European Union, the Organisation of American States and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). In 1999 the Small Arms Programme of research on light weapons was established at the Institut universitaire des hautes études in Geneva. Every year since 2001 it has published a yearbook containing essential information on this subject.

Switzerland's commitment

Switzerland is very active in the fight against the proliferation of illicit light weapons :

- its diplomatic initiatives contribute to the establishment of international norms. Since 2000 for example it has campaigned for better marking of arms and for the registration of their owners. This activity led to the adoption by all members of the UN of the international instrument for the rapid and reliable identification and tracing of illicit light weapons at the end of 2005.



On the streets of Port-au-Prince (Cité du Soleil), Haiti, 2004



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- On 7 June 2006, Switzerland and the UNDP organised a ministerial summit on armed violence and development in Geneva. The 42 participating countries adopted the Geneva Declaration on armed violence and development and also gave new undertakings to increase efforts to reduce the disastrous effects of armed violence on socio-economic and human development.
- Switzerland helps countries and non-governmental organisations to implement the United Nations Programme of action.
- Switzerland also contributes to projects for the destruction of superfluous stocks of light arms and small weapons and to the improvement of the management of such stocks, in particular in the framework of the OSCE and the PfP.
- It makes a substantial financial contribution to the efforts of the UNDP to combat the proliferation of light weapons.
- It was at Switzerland's instigation that the Small Arms Survey programme was established. It is largely financed by Switzerland.

Definition *

Small arms and light weapons mean any man-portable lethal weapon that expels or launches, is designed to expel or launch, or may be readily converted to expel or launch a shot, bullet or projectile by the action of an explosive, with the exception of antique and replicas of antique small arms and light weapons. Antique and replicas of antique small arms and light weapons will be defined in accordance with domestic law. Antique small arms and light weapons will in no circumstances include weapons manufactured after 1899.

a) Small arms are, broadly speaking, weapons designed for individual use.

They include, inter alia, revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns.

b) Light weapons are, broadly speaking, weapons designed for use by two or three persons serving as a crew, although some may be carried and used by a single person. They include, inter alia, heavy machine guns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles, portable launchers of anti-tank missile and rocket systems, portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems, and mortars of a calibre of less than 100 millimetres.

* Definition taken from the United Nations International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons