

Chapter 7

*Light Weapons and Early Warning: Initial Steps**

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Introduction

In the years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the nature of conflict has changed. Now, rather than the threat of global annihilation from nuclear war, it is with smaller, though still deadly, conflicts that the international community is preoccupied. These wars, often fought internally between government forces and insurgents, present new challenges. Not only their resolution, but also their prevention, has become an area for discussion and action. Although a large amount of research has been conducted on the topic, yet *“it is apparent that there is no single approach to conflict resolution that offers overriding promise”*.¹ The same may be said of approaches to conflict prevention. While it is impossible to discuss current conflicts without understanding the underlying causes of the situation – the ‘root causes’ of conflict – it is equally erroneous to discuss the prevention and resolution of conflicts without acknowledging the tools being used to wage war: namely conventional armaments and particularly light weapons.

Although it is recognised that it is better to prevent conflicts than *“to respond to their consequences”*,² most are well-established before a response is mustered by the international community. These interventions then are, of necessity, short-term attempts to contain a situation and lessen the impact on civilians and non-combatants. While it is obviously necessary to respond to the crisis, this ‘firefighting’ approach complicates pre-conflict attempts at prevention by drawing attention away from the development of early-warning systems and other means of identifying potential conflict areas. The same applies to the role of light weapons in conflicts. Once a conflict has erupted, attempts to stop the provision of weaponry take the form of controls on transfers to the country or countries involved, largely through the use of embargoes. However, this approach ignores the fact that by the time of the outbreak of conflict much of the

required weaponry has already been stockpiled by the combatants and, anticipating the likelihood of sanctions, they have already made agreements for the resupply of weapons and ammunition by acquiescent neighbouring countries or groups.

Therefore the challenge is twofold. First, the international community must be challenged to realise the need for prioritising the early recognition of potential conflicts and responding to these. Second, the measures that can be taken prior to the outbreak of conflict must be identified, in order to distinguish patterns of weapons supply and potentially destabilising accumulations and devise means of using the accumulated information to prevent or forestall the outbreak of conflict.

Conflict Prevention, Resolution and Arms Control

A primary concern of many international and regional organisations is the prevention and resolution of conflicts. From the OAU to the UN, efforts are made to prevent the outbreak of war. The role of arms control in preventing conflict, however, has been underestimated and therefore restricted. Traditionally, thinking has maintained that, “*states have a sovereign right to defend themselves and ... arms control should follow conflict resolution, not the reverse*”.³ Thus, most arms control initiatives are created in response to situations, not developed as a means of preventing war. However, there is no reason why these control mechanisms, or regional variants, including the UN Register of Conventional Arms and the Wassenaar Arrangement, cannot be modified to be utilised as a means of identifying destabilising arms accumulations as threats to stability and signs of potential conflict.

The UN Register grew out of discussions in the Conference on Disarmament on transparency in armaments and the post-Gulf War realisation that there could be ‘excessive and destabilising’⁴ accumulations of conventional weapons. The Register is not a control mechanism; rather its function is to increase transparency among countries by asking that they report imports and exports of seven categories of weapons. Its utility in identifying potentially destabilising accumulations of weapons is restricted by the low returns received from non-OECD importing countries and the type of weapons requested to be reported.

The Wassenaar Arrangement is the thirty-three member organisation that came into being after the end of the Cold War, as the successor to the Co-ordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Countries (COCOM).⁵ While neither the UN Register nor the Wassenaar Arrangement was created to provide a means of early warning of weapons accumulations, and neither includes light weapons as a category covered, both have the potential to be modified to include these aspects. However, both are restricted in some ways by the fact that they are governmental mechanisms and so rely entirely on information provided to them by governments. In the case of weapons transfers, especially light weapons transfers which are rarely disclosed, this reliance on governmental information may hamper the provision of information for early warning purposes, as countries may have reasons, political as well as security, for choosing not to disclose vital information.

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this volume, there has been a significant increase in the number of international and regional initiatives in the past three years for placing the issue of light weapons and small arms firmly on the agenda of the international community and within policy-making spheres. In a short time, too, the commitment by countries and organisations to address the notably sticky issue of light weapons control has resulted in tangible products, including the OAS initiatives on model regulations and arms trafficking, and the EU and G-8 initiatives on illicit arms trafficking. However, the current work overlooks an important area of conflict prevention in which arms control could play a significant role: early warning. While some initiatives, such as the UN Register and the nascent Wassenaar Arrangement, are increasing the amount of available information on arms transfers and others are making recommendations to countries for improving national control, there has been little discussion of how this information, and more that remains to be collected, can be put to use in preventing conflicts.

Thus a new item needs to be added to the light weapons control agenda: the monitoring of patterns of accumulation or transfers of arms that do not necessarily rely on the participation of the source or end-use country as a means of identifying possible areas of tension or potential conflict. As Spear maintains: “*Given the important role that arms can play in both catalysing and sustaining ... conflicts, it would make sense to include*

information on the transfer, deployment, or use of weapons in an early warning system.”⁶

Early Warning and Conflict Prevention

Early warning is a crucial component of conflict prevention and there have been increasing calls for the development of such systems. The G-7 (the G-8 since Russia’s inclusion), suggested in 1995 that there be an exploration of the means of analysing and utilising early warning information, and the UN has recommended the creation of an early warning system to assist policy makers. Within Africa, the OAU is committing resources to developing an indigenous capacity for early warning.

There are five identified elements of the early warning process: information gathering; information sharing; the analysis and interpretation of the shared information; the identification of potential risks of conflict from the analysed material; and, should action be deemed necessary, the appropriate response.⁷ For early warning to work, however, there must be a commitment by the organisation initiating the system to develop a “*high-level capability for collecting and analysing information on a particular crisis area and translating this information into strategic alternatives*”.⁸ Which organisations will develop early warning capacities remains to be seen. However, whichever they are, they will require a network of information providers. These can include, among others, NGOs, the media, the UN and its agencies, member states, academics and researchers and sub-regional organisations. Any efforts at early warning must, as a matter of course, recognise the fundamentals of national sovereignty, the need for confidentiality and a means of verifying information.⁹

In developing policy on light weapons for conflict prevention, and especially an early warning system, these considerations are also relevant. The issue of preventive action in arms control is sensitive. As noted earlier, it has generally been that arms control follows conflict resolution, given the right of states to self-defence and the difficulty of ascertaining potentially dangerous accumulations. But the nature of conflict has changed, and with it the traditional means of weapons supply. As the methods of transfer become more diffuse and weapons use more indiscriminate, civilians often

being the targets, the international community must commit itself to working towards preventing conflict through monitoring weapons flows and accumulations.

Developing an Early Warning System for Light Weapons Proliferation

At the 1996 OSCE Summit in Lisbon, Portugal, EU governments, amongst others, stated that the ending of illegal arms supplies was a priority for regional and global security.¹⁰ The EU, in identifying the challenges facing conflict prevention in Africa, highlights the need for EU countries to prevent the flow of arms from the EU to parts of Africa, “*if conflicts are to be resolved and prevented*”.¹¹ However, as Greene indicates, “*it is easier to agree that ‘something should be done’ than it is to identify useful and effective policy responses*”.¹²

In terms of developing an early warning system, the starting point is to develop the capacity to monitor arms flows into and out of countries and regions and weapons accumulations within countries. This relies on the collection, dissemination and analysis of information. While the difficulties in tracking arms build-ups cannot be underestimated, as there is little precedent for countries making available information on light weapons transfers, the gathering of this information could be a valuable adjunct to broader conflict prevention initiatives. Such a system of monitoring could be undertaken by an organisation in the region, an organisation outside of the region, including, perhaps, the UN, or NGOs.

Southern Africa is an area in which the basic structures necessary for developing an early warning system are already in place, though not yet fully operational. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 7, the OAU as the regional organisation for the continent is complemented by the SADC and its Organ on Politics, Defence and Security. The Organ was established as a mechanism to “*strengthen regional solidarity and provide for mutual peace and security*”.¹³ At present the Organ operates largely at the level of heads of state. However, one of its sub-committees, the ISDSC, and the independent SARPCCO are co-operating on light weapons-related issues. In addition, the countries in Southern Africa have begun to realise the

destabilising effects that massive amounts of poorly controlled weapons can have on local areas and regions.¹⁴

An understanding of the supply patterns of weapons is necessary to develop effective policy interventions. In areas with huge stocks of surplus weapons, it is not always necessary for governments or insurgents to import new arms from abroad. In addition to the diffusion of existing stocks and imports of weaponry, other modes of acquisition of light weapons include indigenous production, illicit imports (which can be either covert transfers between governments, the arming of subnational groups by governments to supplement national security forces and grey and black market imports)¹⁵ in-country circulation in which legal weapons are lost or stolen and enter the illegal channel, theft from government armouries, arms transfers between sub-national groups and criminal organisations, and arms deals conducted between subnational groups.¹⁶

Southern Africa provides a clear example of how weapons can spread through an area. It has, in the past decade, experienced a period of profound political change. With the resolution of conflicts in Namibia and Mozambique, the election of a new government in South Africa and the continuing, however haltingly, peace process in Angola, it is a time for optimism about the future of the region. Yet frustrations at the pace of transition have prompted those with little else to use the skills learned during wartime for subsistence in peacetime. The effects of weapons being sold or bartered from Mozambique have been felt in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Swaziland. Likewise, weapons sold for food or smuggled for greater gain from Angola have impacted on communities in Namibia, Botswana and South Africa.

Southern Africa is not an isolated example of weapons accumulations in such quantities as to be potentially destabilising. Latin America, South East Asia and parts of Eastern Europe are facing the same challenges. For this reason, the need for an early warning system for light weapons becomes only too clear. In practical terms, such a system should include the five elements identified in the previous section. Information gathering, the first phase, should focus on:

- monitoring of the location, collection and disposal of weapons in post-conflict peace operations;

- monitoring of the management and destruction of weapons stocks that are obsolete or surplus;
- monitoring of the internal controls over state-owned stocks of weapons (defence and police);
- monitoring of corruption within departments which oversee weapons control or distribution;
- monitoring of smuggling networks;
- monitoring of black market weapons prices as an indicator of availability and demand.
- monitoring of borders between the countries of warring factions for weapons transfers;
- monitoring of government policies regarding weapons in civilian possession, and especially any occurrence of weapons being distributed to the general population; and
- monitoring of the effective demobilisation and reintegration of former combatants into civil society.¹⁷

Subsequent steps follow those identified earlier, namely information sharing (for example from other regional or sub-regional organisations, countries and NGOs to the organisation collecting the information), the analysis and interpretation of this information, the identification of potential conflicts from this analysis and appropriate responses. The use of a consultative mechanism, such as that created within the Wassenaar Arrangement, would provide the forum, within say the EU, for such discussions.

There are, furthermore, measures that countries can undertake unilaterally to increase the available information on the patterns of arms flows and enhance the validity of information collected within the early warning system.

- Increasing transparency about arms production and acquisition;
- Sharing of intelligence on known smuggling networks and illicit arms markets;
- Bilateral and regional co-operation to combat smuggling and find and destroy arms caches (as between Mozambique and South Africa);
- Harmonising national legislation among countries for the import, export and transit of arms shipments;

- Establishing national co-ordination committees to bring together relevant officials for national action and regional interactions; and
- Harmonising regulations among countries in a region pertaining to firearm ownership and use.

For example, South Africa has established bilateral agreements with Swaziland, Namibia and Mozambique to engage in information sharing and co-operative efforts to reduce cross-border smuggling of goods, including firearms. South Africa and Mozambique have co-operated in a series of operations in Mozambique to identify and destroy arms and ammunition caches left over from the war. The most recent operation in July/August 1997 resulted in the destruction of more than 5 500 machine guns, sub-machine guns and automatic rifles and millions of rounds of ammunition.¹⁸

In addition, the members of SARPCCO have recently signed an agreement for co-operation in combating cross-border crime.¹⁹ These regional efforts are bolstering national attempts to address both legal and illegal firearms, especially in South Africa, which has undertaken investigations into alleged corruption within the Central Firearms Registry and is drafting new legislation the more adequately to oversee the licensing of civilian-owned firearms.

In many ways the monitoring of arms flows as early warning and the development of methods to control light weapons are closely linked. Especially for countries and regional organisations which are not in the immediate region, policies to support an early warning system or efforts to increase regional control over weapons are similar. Actions that can be taken include the following: providing technical assistance, including developing effective control over weaponry being imported, exported and transiting a country; providing training and capacity-building; and facilitating the open exchange of information among countries, including that regarding smuggling networks and possible arms build-ups. The EU, for example, in order to further its *Programme on Illicit Trafficking*, can initiate discussions between regions on arms control initiatives, lessons learned from past experience, and solutions being considered by other regions which are experiencing similar problems. In addition, countries outside the region should also consider implementing the following

measures on a regional basis: creating a central repository of information on arms manufacturers, brokers and suspect recipients that can be accessed by identified countries (for example, members of Interpol); encouraging countries to undertake national parliamentary debates on furthering the *Programme on Illicit Trafficking*; encouraging the sharing of information between countries; and requiring the registering and marking of all weapons and ammunition.²⁰

However, it is important to recognise that regional organisations must ultimately support processes that countries have developed. Thus there is a need for countries outside the region to assess their own existing legislation and regulations, including the compatibility of import and export legislation, the adequacy of existing legislation for national and regional need and the impact of firearms within that country. This latter point should lead to the creation of a national inter-agency committee to co-ordinate national actions and regional interactions.²¹ Countries should also undertake steps nationally to improve transparency of arms exports. While currently a few countries have statutes requiring that Parliament be notified of proposed sales, the compilation of this information should be encouraged. In devising mechanisms to monitor weapons flows and develop policy for weapons control, it is important to focus on the practical steps that gradually, taken together, may lead to a solution.

Conclusion

In addition to those challenges posed by attempting to control light weapons, there is that of using the monitoring of weapons movements as a tool of conflict prevention. While there is “*a growing international consensus that small arms and light weapons play a major role in the outbreak and exacerbation of conflict*”,²² the difficulty of undertaking the type of information gathering necessary to set up an early warning system is very real. Assuming, too, that information is gathered and analysed and the decision made to take action, the obstacles to mounting effective preventive action remain. As Laurance notes, “*not all conflicts are susceptible to policy action which focus[es] on preventing or stemming the flow of light weapons*”.²³ In those instances where that is not the case, the international community has a responsibility to devise policy to prevent the outbreak of further conflicts.

Endnotes

- * This is a modified version of a chapter which appears in P Cross (ed.) Contributing to Preventive Action, Conflict Prevention Network Yearbook 97/98, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Brussels, 1998.
- 1 D Hamburg, Preventing Contemporary Intergroup Violence, Carnegie Corporation, New York, 1993, p. 10.
- 2 EU, European Union and Conflict Prevention in Africa: An African Response: Report of the Meeting Held 8 May 1996, Lisbon, p. 2.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 4 Although there is no agreed-upon definition of excessive and destabilising arms accumulations, Edward Laurance has suggested that “*accumulations of weapons become ‘excessive’ when the state cannot prevent their illegitimate acquisition and use, creating a significant potential for violence. Accumulations become ‘destabilising’ when they manifest themselves in crime, armed violence and other effects.*” (E Laurance, “Light Weapons Accumulations and Intra-State Conflict: Early Warning Factors and Preventive Action”, unpubl. paper, June 1997, p. 8.)
- 5 For further discussion on the Wassenaar Arrangement, see Chapter 1, p. 13.
- 6 J Spear, *Arms Limitations, Confidence-Building Measures and Internal Conflict* in M Brown (ed.), The International Dimensions of Internal Conflict, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996, pp. 399-400.
- 7 Developed from Howard Adelman and Susanne Schmeidl, “Early Warning Models and Networking”, paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Chicago, February 1995, in Laurance, *ibid.*, p. 43.
- 8 H Adelman and A Suhrke, The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience: Early Warning and Conflict Management, Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, Copenhagen, March 1996, p. 80.
- 9 Adapted from V Gouden, *The Concept of Early Warning: Early Warning Network in Africa* in S Ibok and W Nhara (eds), OAU Early Warning System on Conflict Situations in Africa, OAU, Addis Ababa, 1996, pp. 40-52.
- 10 OSCE, Summit Declaration, Lisbon, 3 December 1996.
- 11 European Union, *op cit.*, p. 6.
- 12 Owen Greene, Tackling Light Weapons Proliferation: Issues and Priorities for the EU, Saferworld, London, 1997, p. 2.
- 13 M Malan and J Cilliers, SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security: Future Developments, ISS Paper #19, ISS, Midrand, South Africa, March 1997, p. 1.
- 14 Enhancing these structures to be utilised to address arms control issues, in addition to identifying patterns of arms flows in the region, is also part of the work being undertaken by the Arms Management Programme at the ISS, see Preface above.
- 15 For the purposes of this paper, black markets trade in *illegal weapons* while grey markets exploit “*legal loopholes, third-party brokering, inadequate or neglected end-use guarantees, or on governments turning a blind eye to questionable or illicit trade*”. See Greene, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- 16 Developed from Laurance, *op. cit.*, pp. 10 - 12.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.
- 18 *Arms Destroyed by SA, Moz Police, The Citizen* (South Africa), 12 August 1997.
- 19 See *Cross Border Anti-Crime Pact Signed, Southern African News Features*, 29 October 1997.
- 20 These recommendations draw in part on the outcome of research undertaken by the Arms Management Programme at the ISS on developing regional mechanisms for control in Southern Africa. They also draw on current work of the OAS and NGOs, including the British-American Security Information Council, Saferworld and others.
- 21 This section is adapted from a presentation made by the author to the UN Regional Workshop on Firearms Regulation held in Arusha, Tanzania, 3-7 November 1997.
- 22 Laurance, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 30.