

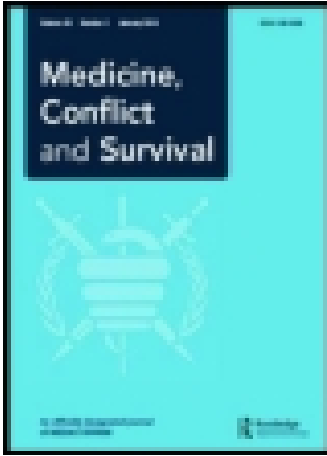
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Impact of proliferation of small arms and light weapons in south Asia

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Abstract

Small arms and light weapons (SALW) cause much death and injury around the world, through war, homicide and suicide. The problems of SALW in south Asia have to be seen within a global context, but the region itself has special concerns which must be understood by the world. Ultimately these issues will only be resolved through international co-operation, which in turn requires people to become active in urging their political leaders to take the right path.

Keywords: *Arms control, Arms trade, Conflict deaths, Small arms and light weapons, South Asia*

The problem

Proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is of worldwide concern and has become a particular problem for South Asia, where there are conflicts in almost all countries. Political violence in our region involves Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, including interstate war, sectarian conflict, guerrilla warfare and organised crime. Some areas are becoming weapon-dependent societies, the problems of terrorism adding fuel to the fire.

Small arms include revolvers, pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine-guns. Light weapons comprise any weapon that can be carried by one or two people or mounted on a vehicle or carried by an animal, including heavy machine-guns, grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, and mortars of less than 100 mm calibre. Ammunition and explosives include cartridges for small arms, shells and missiles for light weapons, anti-personnel and anti-tank grenades, anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems, mobile containers with missiles or shells, and landmines.

The global magnitude

The annual reports of the Small Arms Survey [1] over the last five years have highlighted various aspects of the problem:

- 2001: profiling the problem;
- 2002: counting the human cost;
- 2003: development denied;
- 2004: rights at risk;
- 2005: weapons at war.

The Small Arms Surveys have emphasised the size of the problem; there are 639 million small arms and light weapons in circulation, which is more than one for every ten people on the planet. This has a severe impact on human development, causing morbidity and mortality, the collapse of basic services and decline in economic activity.

More than four million small arms have been eliminated from the global stockpile in the last decade due to Weapon Collection Programs, but eight million such arms are manufactured each year. Thirteen countries profit greatly from this trade, in particular the United States, Russia and China. Civilians possess the majority of the weapons, with 59 per cent of SALW being owned privately, 38 per cent by government armed forces, 2.8 per cent by police and 0.2 per cent by insurgents.

Worldwide the authorised trade is estimated at US\$4–5 billion, and there is also an illicit trade of significant proportions. The Small Arms Survey estimates that there are between 17 and 25 direct deaths due to SALW per million of the global population each year. This excludes indirect deaths from war and civil strife through disease and famines. Each year 100 relief workers die through small arms and 280 relief workers are injured. Each year two million small arms are destroyed by authorities. During the period from 1991 to 2000, in 46 out of 49 conflicts SALW were the weapons of choice, causing 300,000 deaths each year, of which 90 per cent were civilians, 80 per cent women and children. In the US, there are about 220 million weapons. These result in 2800 deaths annually, are the leading cause of death in the 15–24 years age group, and the third cause of death in the under-15 age group.

Through discussions held at various international forums, 18 countries have developed specific national strategies, 40 have laws controlling arms brokers, while 14 are having deliberations. On the other hand, 120 states have failed to review their laws and 100 states do not co-ordinate national actions.

South Asia

South Asia has two notorious centres in the region which create a nexus of drugs and arms exports: these are the Golden Triangle including parts

of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, and the Golden Crescent including parts of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. The region in total has 75 million firearms, of which 63 million are in civilian hands, 40 million in India, 20 million in Pakistan and three million in Nepal and Sri Lanka.

India

The magnitude of the problem in India is by no means a small one. In the past ten years, there have been 75,000 deaths by such weapons and 4500 illicit arms have been seized. Most of the homemade arms are from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, whilst foreign-made weapons are smuggled through Mumbai via air and sea routes. There are five million such arms with terrorists, insurgents and criminals (about one per cent of total weapons). Twenty-five per cent of the trade is illegal (US\$1.5 billion). Small arms killed Prime Minister Indira Gandhi; terrorism shattered Punjab; there is a burning problem in North-east India; Kashmir is bleeding; and the People's War Group, the Naxalites and other smaller terrorist groups are causing havoc in India with these weapons.

Pakistan

In Pakistan, there are reportedly 18 million illegal weapons. Over an 18-month period during 2001–2002, 210,000 illegal weapons were recovered, which is believed to be just the tip of the iceberg. It is reported that there are nine illegal weapons for each legal weapon. *Al Qaida* and other such terrorist organisations are defying the authorities. The town of Darra Adamkhel, in the North West Frontier region, is the biggest manufacturer and supplier of low-cost arms in Pakistan, making replicas of brand-named weapons. It houses 900 factories, large and small, all illegal, and the 150 arms and ammunition shops in the town do a roaring business. A US firm reportedly placed orders for 24,000 guns worth US\$3 million.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is facing its own problems. There is long-standing hostility between the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) and the majority Sinhalese population, with many casualties on both sides in a conflict mainly using small arms and light weapons.

Nepal

The magnitude of the problem in Nepal, though not as big as in India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka, cannot be ignored. The country has a constitutional monarchy with multi-party democracy, but the last king and his family were

killed, and Maoist group insurgency activities resulted in the death of an estimated 2000 civilians since 1996. A five-month survey in 2004 showed that the leading causes of combat deaths were small arms (85 per cent) and improvised explosives (IED) (14 per cent).

Bangladesh

Bangladesh separated from Pakistan in 1971, through a bloody struggle leaving tens of thousands dead. In 1975, its first Prime Minister, Sheik Mujib, was assassinated. There has been ongoing political unrest and there are reports of human rights violations on some ethnic groups, women and children.

Bhutan

There are over 100,000 refugees from Bhutan, where there is a hereditary monarchy, living in United Nations (UN) camps in Nepal.

Afghanistan

Since 1979 Afghanistan has been invaded by the super-powers and by its neighbours, and controlled by the Mujahideen and later the Taliban. The country is awash with small arms from each invasion force. Many warlord and inter-group rivalries continue. The country has a high rate of illiteracy and poverty. 18,000 deaths were reported up to 2002 in Operation Enduring Freedom.

The Maldives

The Maldives became independent from British rule in 1965. It is a peaceful group of islands, with a GDP of US\$2082 *per capita* and tourism as a major industry. Exceptionally in this region there are no issues concerning SALW.

Throughout south Asia key issues that need to be addressed include the role of women, child soldiers, public health, development and regional perspectives. Small arms pose a major problem; they are a big business causing much damage and ultimately are a global challenge, requiring control of the arms trade including the arms brokers, and the marking, tracing, collection and destruction of weapons.

Medical aspects

The many casualties from small arms in south Asia create a huge burden on both health services and governments. Treating the victims takes away vital

funds from health facilities needed for treating other diseases. They leave behind a trail of disabled people needing extra medical attention. There are personal costs of treatment and rehabilitation along with the grave psychological and psychosocial costs.

In some areas of conflict, attacks on health workers result in the closure of health institutes. Due to this loss of services, vaccination and immunisation coverage falls, life expectancy decreases and child mortality rates increase.

Social aspects

There are 1.33 billion people in south Asia with an average *per capita* income of only US\$430. They are surrounded by a widespread illicit trade in drugs and arms, which creates fear among the populations and feeds hatreds and divisions. This places a burden on the economy which causes the development of the countries to lag behind. Funds have to be diverted to pay compensation to victims and deal with illegal organisations.

The problem of SALW causes destruction and the decline of physical infrastructure and agricultural production. It affects families and their children, leading to reduced school enrolment. Foreign and domestic investment decreases, resulting in loss of domestic revenue. Forty-four per cent of the world's poor are in South Asia, where 522 million people earn less than one US dollar per day.

Children are increasingly being exposed to guns, coming to believe that weapons are essential instruments for protection and survival. This ultimately leads to gun dependency, gun glorification and a culture of violence, fear and hopelessness.

Conflict has resulted in the forced migration of 35 million people. This further inhibits development, is estimated to reduce regional GDP by 15 per cent, and leads to restriction of basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter.

Organisations in the South Asia region are seeking to build a regional advocacy network promoting transparency on arms transfers and developing public education campaigns, allowing a shift of state expenditures to human development. The South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) was established in 1985 by the Heads of State or Government of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to provide a platform for the peoples of south Asia to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding. Despite this, various regional factors contribute to the uneasy relations between neighbours, hindering further control of the proliferation of SALW and a disinclination to address the problem. As a result south Asia lags far behind its potential.

Worldwide action

The scale of the worldwide problem can be estimated from information from the Small Arms Surveys and from the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) [2]. The toll includes:

- War related deaths 300,000
- Peacetime deaths 200,000
- Non-fatal injuries 1,500,000
- Child deaths (since 1990) 2,000,000
- Gun deaths (first half of 2005) 165,750

Through the UN, action continues to be taken on these issues. The United Nations Second Biennial Meeting of States was held in New York in July 2005 to consider implementation of the Program of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate Illicit Trade in SALW in all its aspects. Various conventions and protocols have been formulated in this regard, including the Organization of American States Firearms Convention 1997, the UN Firearms Protocol 2001, the UN Program of Action 2001, Southern African Development Community Firearms Protocol 2001, the Wassenaar Arrangement 2002 and European Union Code of Conduct 2003. The main objective of these agreements is to try to control the flow of both legal and illicit arms across national boundaries, and to share information between the co-operating states.

Worldwide campaigns include International Gun Destruction Day on 9 July and a Global Week of Action on Small Arms in June.

Solutions

The Indian writer and politician, Arun Shourie, speaking at the UN conference on Illicit Trade of SALW in 2001, said, 'we should act with the urgency of a man whose hair is on fire' [3]. The Program of Action from this conference highlights the steps needed to prevent, combat and eradicate these weapons and their trade:

- International Acts to identify and trace illicit weapons, and to make illicit gun possession an offence;
- Interpol Weapons and Explosives Tracking System to track officially-held guns by marking of guns at point of manufacture for identification and tracing;
- small arms advisory service including identification and destruction of surplus weapons;
- conflict prevention, peace-building and information exchange;
- enforcing sanctions and arms embargoes to prevent stockpiling and support regional agreements;

- identifying links in illicit trade in arms and drugs;
- provision to disarm, demobilise and re-integrate (DDR) ex-combatants in post-conflict areas, especially post-conflict rehabilitation;
- strengthening of the financing of programmes;
- necessary legislative measures established and a national co-ordination agency set up;
- restricting the supply of ammunition and records of gun manufacture, with control over manufacturing and marketing;
- rigorous and comprehensive enforcement by including civil society organisations;
- enhancing transparency in armaments trade and issue of end-user certificates for exports, including notification of supplier nation of re-export and proper procedure and documentation for export, transit and brokering. Taking due care and sense of responsibility while transferring weapons, and no transfer to non-state actors and unauthorised entities.

The most important component is the destruction of weapons where conflicts have ended, so that arms are not passed on to terrorists somewhere else through illicit trade. Various destruction techniques include band sawing, burning, crushing, oxyacetylene or plasma cutting, hydro-abrasive cutting, hydraulic shear cutting, cement casting, deep sea dumping, detonation, dismantling, recycling and shredding, and also safe storage.

Key tasks are to exchange information, international understanding, co-operation and legally binding instruments. Small arms and light weapons need as much attention as weapons of mass destruction; it is not only the weapons themselves which need this attention but also the ammunition, as without this the weapons are of no use.

Who is going to do this? Who will bell the cat? Can our politicians be depended upon? Is it not the duty of the police or the army to do this? To solve the problem we must all raise questions like this! All of us will have to work honestly and with the zeal of someone who does not have the word impossible in their dictionary.

We will have to speak about this issue where we are working and bring to the knowledge of all our colleagues the dangers these weapons present to our society and to our little world. We will have to change public opinion about such important matters so that they will elect honest and dedicated leaders who will be more concerned about them than about the arms manufacturers and arms dealers. In this way, large amounts of money will be saved which can be utilised for the betterment of society.

We know the problem, we know what needs to be done, and we have the technology for this within our reach. All of us must have the will power to resolve the issue, sacrificing monetary gains, to have a much better world to live in. Let the future not walk on blood.

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