

Small Arms: A Brief Introduction

Small arms and light weapons (SALW) are defined as smaller, easily concealable weapons that are usually operated by one person. These weapons generally include handguns, machine guns, landmines, hand grenades, or light missiles. Small arms are a dangerous threat because they are relatively easy to handle and are not difficult to obtain. As a result, the majority of internal or regional conflicts are waged with small arms and light weapons. Many of these conflicts occur in Africa, where the illicit trade of small arms is prevalent in many African countries. The ease in which these weapons have been obtained has created a dangerous instability in the area. In addition to illicit trafficking, the use of child soldiers has also become a serious problem in Africa. Since small arms are relatively easy to operate, numerous African countries have used children to operate firearms in wars.

The United Nations estimates that more than 300,000 civilians each year are killed by small arms. More civilians each year are killed by these weapons than tanks, bombs, or warships. This poses a huge problem for the international community, as small arms and light weapons only prolong conflicts and increase casualties each year. The proliferation of small arms also causes wide spread long term effects. With such an imminent threat in the African continent, humanitarian and peace building efforts have been thwarted. Human rights abuses are rampant throughout these countries, as the possession of small arms only prolongs conflict. Finally, economic and

social development in these regions has been severely hampered by the presence of small arms. These are all problems that can be fixed with a better grasp on the proliferation of small arms.

What the United Nations Has Done

The international community has taken numerous steps to stop the proliferation of small arms. This problem was introduced to the United Nations in 1995, when the General Assembly passed resolution A/RES/50/70B, which called for a more thorough observation of the use of small arms. In 2001, the United Nations Conference on Illicit Traffic in Small Arms and Light Weapons was held in New York. Here, states committed to a dedicated response in stopping the small arms trade. Regional meetings have also been held to determine a better working solution to this global issue. Despite these advances, small arms are still prevalent, especially in lesser developed countries.

Issues to Consider

Obviously, we cannot simply create a ban on all small arms and light weapons. The majority of nations manufactures and uses small arms for defensive and military purposes. A complete ban on these weapons would not be in the best interest of most states.

Some questions to consider:

- Small arms can't be destroyed or eliminated. How can we stop the proliferation of these weapons if there is an excess of them?
- How do we address the national, regional, and global levels of this problem?

- What are some possible solutions to the illicit arms trafficking that occurs in Africa? Can we ever get states to comply with these solutions?
- How do we keep track of small arms and light weapons?