

Arms Flow to Africa

by
Jayantha Dhanapala
Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs



Subgroup V of the Security Council Ad Hoc Working Group on Africa

United Nations Headquarters, New York
12 August 1998

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Security Council,

I welcome the invitation to participate in your discussions on arms flows to Africa which has become a subject of urgent concern to the UN. It has been highlighted in the Secretary-General's report on "The causes of Conflict and the Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa". My presentation to you tDDay is in line with my Department's contribution to the formulation of a co-ordinated response by the Secretariat to the Secretary-General's report.

The easy availability of huge numbers of weapons to people operating mostly outside the reach of legitimate state authority has security implications which go far beyond the territorial

frontiers of a few immediately affected countries. The correlation between arms flows and the increased incidence of conflicts and crime is clearly evident. The many and largely unmanned geographical frontiers in Africa provide hospitable terrain for trans boundary movement of illicit arms traffic, which is often carried out in collusion with trade in contraband goods and acts of criminality.

Let me be quite clear. My focus is not on the legitimate acquisition of arms in pursuance of national defense needs guaranteed in Article 51 of the UN Charter. It is rather the excessive and destabilizing accumulation and transfer of arms, including their illicit production and transfer, which has brutalized societies and created a dangerous "gun culture". I can do no better than quote from the Secretary-General's Report on Small Arms (and I quote from para.37 of A/52/298)

"Accumulations of small arms and light weapons become excessive and destabilizing:

- when States, supplier or recipient, do not exercise restraint in the production, transfer and acquisition of such weapons beyond those needed for legitimate national and collective defense and internal security;
- when States, supplier or recipient, cannot exercise effective control to prevent their illegitimate acquisition, transfer, transit or circulation; and,
- when their use manifests itself in armed conflict, in crimes, such as arms and drug trafficking, or other actions contrary to norms of national or international law."

For the UN, the recurrent use of arms in Africa in violation of accepted norms of international law poses more than a new challenge to international security. Every new instance of armed violence in Africa threatens to undo decades of developmental work in some of the poorest regions of the world and create humanitarian disasters. Every new spate of refugees fleeing from violence creates additional burden for the scarce resources of the sheltering countries. Every time there is a new round of civil unrest there is an enormous chance that the worst victims will be the most vulnerable sections of society. Weapons seem to change hands in Africa much too often to ascertain their original ownership which is one of the more baffling features of the current arms flow scenario in that continent. The modes of transfer are devious and opaque.

Arms flows during the cold war remain an unhappy legacy. In addition, the relatively recent rise in the number and types of arms freely changing hands in Africa is, at least, partly a result of three somewhat new trends in that region: demilitarization; demobilization and the successful culmination of national liberation movements. Each one of these long awaited trends has released into civil society a large number of weapons at a time when, in several countries, state institutions for maintenance of law and order are still in the process of formation. Yesterday's weapons of war and political liberation in the region have become tDDay's weapons of crime, terrorism and violence.

Mr. Chairman

I understand that this subgroup would like me to describe the magnitude of the problem in plain statistics.

Let me state at the outset that the statistical profile I am about to present is a composite sketch created from different open sources of information - mostly from world wide academic and research institutes about 35 of whom are devoting special attention to arms transfers including those to Africa. There are at least twenty reputed scholars concentrating on those subregions where arms flows have been noteworthy either because of their large volume or their circuitous modes of transfer or the disastrous consequences of their use. There has also been a flurry of activities organized by NGOs and intergovernmental bodies to address the broader need for global action on small arms and light weapons (DDA maintains an evolving text to keep track of major events).

The sixteen member Panel of Governmental Experts established by the Secretary-General, in pursuance of Res. 50/70B to assist him in preparing the first UN report on excessive and destabilising accumulation, proliferation and use of small arms, held a subregional workshop in Pretoria in 1996. The information gathered there has become a part of DDA's database. The invitees to the workshop were chosen with a view to better understand the characteristics which Africa shares with other regions as well as its own uniqueness when it comes to assessing the suitability of various proposals aimed at effectively addressing African concerns. High ranking officials from foreign offices and ministries of interior, as well as law enforcement, were invited to the workshop after it became clear in the preparatory process that similar weapons were being used for ordinary acts of criminality, for organized crime and for political violence. The papers presented at the workshop will be published in a book this year. The appeal made unanimously by the participants in the workshop in Pretoria in 1996 is grounded in the realities of Africa and contains an analysis of the problem as well as possible solutions offered by Africans.

Very rough estimates put the total number of weapons in circulation worldwide, and unaccounted for, as close to 500 million exclusive of the rounds of ammunition which would invariably be larger. Of this, more than 100 million are believed to be assault rifles. A very large proportion of these weapons are believed to be concentrated in three subregions: South West Asia and South East Asia; Central America; and some parts of Africa (i.e Southern Africa; East Africa; and the Horn of Africa). Of the three sub-regions, the largest single concentration might well be in Africa. South West Asia seems to account for well over 7 million weapons excluding "Stinger" missiles. A slightly lesser number could be still circulating in South East Asia. It can be reasonably assumed that the number of weapons in circulation in Central America is less than what is floating around in Africa, partly because Africa has witnessed a larger number of civil wars and insurgencies: Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa to mention but a few. (South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe are among the few African countries with a domestic arms manufacturing capacity. South Africa is also among the world's top 30 suppliers of conventional weapons).

The weapons in circulation in Africa are mainly four types:

- Conventional weapons manufactured to military specifications (e.g. machine guns, automatic rifles, pistols, revolvers, land mines, grenades and mortars).
- Weapons not manufactured to military specifications (e.g. hunting rifles).
- Home made guns which are clandestinely produced with locally available and every day use materials.
- Tools and accessories which were used with devastating lethality in places like Rwanda and Burundi (e.g. axes, knives and machetes).

Most of the weapons circulation are known to be already in the region and were presumably supplied legitimately through government to government transfers or through covert sales by governments to national liberation movements or rival political factions. Military equipment roughly worth \$275 millions was sold to Somalia between 1980 to 1989. Rwanda made a single transaction worth \$46 million to import military hardware prior to the 1994 tragedy, in addition to receiving over 1.5 million rounds of ammunition and tens of thousands of grenade launchers and grenades in grants. In Mozambique 300,000 units of assault rifles alone were imported from a single source besides other types of weapons seen in use during the prolonged civil war.

Estimates put figures of wide ranging variation in some areas of heavy concentration of unaccounted weaponry: anywhere between 400,000 to eight million in South Africa and 800,000 to six million in Mozambique. In Angola, at least 700,000 weapons were actually distributed to civilians after the collapse of the peace process in 1992 and it is not known as to how many were retrieved. This figure does not include the weapons retained by the former combatants after the end of civil war. Some estimates of the weapons expected to be recovered from former combatants in Angola put the number at 1 million.

Mr. Chairman

In 1997 SIPRI recorded that there were 25 major armed conflicts in 24 locations and, that despite the declining trend globally, the new conflicts in 1997 were in Africa. Present indications are that 1998 might see this pattern continue.

The risks of trans-boundary escalation of local conflicts are also particularly acute in this continent with its criss-crossing of ethnic affinities across national frontiers. The free circulation of weaponry is known to be responsible for a dramatic increase in crime in Africa: by a startling 100 to 225 percent in some areas.

The rough statistical sketch I have drawn for you is well known and disturbing. What is not so well known, and reassuring, is the fact that African countries themselves have been lately devoting much effort to find appropriate solutions for the problems created by the abundant and

unaccounted arms flows in Africa. These efforts deserve global support and encouragement because they represent the diagnostic and remedial insights of those whose experience is valuable in determining what is required.

By and large, African efforts to meet the challenge posed by arms flows in their continent fall into three broad categories: national programs of weapons collection ; bilateral and neighborly arrangements to stem trans-boundary movement of illicit arms; and subregional or regional measures of political and institutional support. Let me briefly refer to each.

* In places like Angola, Liberia, Mozambique, Somalia and Sierra Leone (to mention a few) efforts have been made to collect weapons from erstwhile insurgents and former combatants with varying degrees of success. With few exceptions, not more than 10% of the unaccounted weapons were actually collected and even among the collected weapons were many which could be considered unusable any way. The experience of weapons collection in Africa, however, has yielded valuable lessons to some of which I wish to draw your attention. Specially successful is the initiative taken by Mali, a country in which preventive diplomacy has met with great success, and has experienced the accomplishment of the weapons collection programs. I recall the historic "Flame of Peace" on 27 March 1996. At this ceremony, officiated by President Konare, some 3000 weapons, voluntarily surrendered by demobilizing rebels, were destroyed in a great bonfire. Mali has also proposed a moratorium on the import, export, and manufacture of small arms in West Africa.

Successful weapons collection programs would gain wider public support if preceded by advocacy campaigns and community involvement. Such programs must begin as soon after the cessation of active hostilities as possible. Incentives for surrender of weapons should not be confined to buy-backs except in cases where the number of weapons in question is small and reliably known. Voluntary weapons' surrender projects require the existence of supportive institutions in which the maintenance and enforcement of law is seen to be nondiscriminatory. Lack of economic opportunities for gainful employment in civilian pursuits is a deterrent for voluntary weapons' surrender even by those who are war weary. Civilian possession of weaponry by itself does not establish criminal intent particularly where incidence of petty criminality and organized crime threatens the daily existence of ordinary people.

* Trans-boundary collusion between traders in contraband goods and dealers in illicit weapons transfers has drawn several African countries into the operational ring of arms flows even when they themselves do not have problems created at the end of insurgencies and national liberation movements. Officials responsible for the maintenance of law and order in countries like Botswana, Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia talk of the perils of their geographical position which makes them

vulnerable because their territories have become conduits for arms transfers to other locations in Africa. Among the arrangements being considered by these countries, in cooperation with their neighbors, are those intended to introduce stricter regulations for issuing licences for weapons possession; curb police corruption with regard to theft and loss of weapons; put in place more effective border control mechanisms; target the activities of organized crime in procuring and distributing weapons; harmonize national legislation for compatible policies governing extradition; and improve pooling of intelligence to monitor and control illicit arms traffic. Affordability of adequate technological equipment and availability of infrastructural support seem to constitute some of the hurdles in the implementation of such arrangements which also require some time to become fully operational in some countries.

* Subregional and regional measures of political and institutional support are beginning to take several forms in Africa. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has adopted a draft text endorsing the Mali proposal of a moratorium on the import, export and manufacture of small arms in West Africa. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is recommending computerized registration of weapons, a regional data bank for all stolen arms and special operations to retrieve and recover stolen weapons. Within its mechanism for the Prevention, Management and Resolution of Conflicts, the OAU is now turning attention to the problem of small arms proliferation in Africa. These initiatives should be seen as yet another expression of African resolve to find African solutions to the problem which has taken a huge human toll on the continent.

Mr. Chairman

My Department has been following the trends in arms flows to Africa and providing advice, assistance and support as requested by Member States and subregional and regional groups. We do so under a broader mandate from the General Assembly as given in resolutions 50/ 70 B and 52/38 J. The report of the Secretary-General in pursuance of Resolution 50/70 B has received endorsement by an overwhelming majority of UN membership. The recommendations of that report are currently being reviewed by a Group of 25 Governmental experts appointed by the Secretary-General to assist him in following the progress made in implementing his report. The Group, which includes now all the P5, will submit its report of the SG in time for the 54th session of the GA in pursuance of res 52/38 J.

Among the recommendations under review is one pertaining to the holding of an international conference on all aspects of illicit arms trade under the aegis of the United Nations. This recommendation has received positive response from several quarters. The Government of Switzerland has offered to host the event in the year 2000. The Secretary-General considers the holding of such a conference as an important step in giving global support to effective measures

for redressing the serious situation resulting from illicit arms traffic.

The Secretary-General's Report on Africa itself has a series of recommendations which my Department is seeking to implement. The public identification of international arms merchants is already being undertaken by a number of prestigious research institutes and the compilation of this information is being undertaken.

Before concluding, let me express a personal view. I believe that the process of disarmament in Africa has entered a crucial phase in which a faster pace of development could make an important contribution. It could act a powerful incentive for voluntary weapons surrender by many of the erstwhile insurgents and former combatants whose number runs into far more than a million in Africa. It could also be a disincentive against the criminal and violent use of weapons by those who may tend to view weapons as currency - both financially and politically - because little else is available. Their number is large and they are mostly younger people who deserve better economic opportunities. To invest in them will be an investment in future. Their stakes in a nonviolent society will be our additional guarantee of an Africa free of excessive and unaccounted flows of arms.

Greater participation by African countries in the Conventional Arms Register and the United Nations system for the Standardized Reporting of Military Expenditures will contribute towards transparency, confidence-building and, eventually, to reductions in arms flows.

I thank you for your attention.