



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Addressing the Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) Problem in Africa

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Abstract:

The issues associated with the proliferation of various forms of Small Arms and Light weapons (SALW) in sub-Saharan Africa, are very disturbing. These weapons have contributed in no small way, to the current state of insecurity on the continent. SALW can be easily procured on the black market, and due to the porous nature of national borders, smuggled from one country to the other for enterprises that are not in the least noble and humane. This paper attempts to throw more light on the problem and to proffer practical solutions that can be applied to comprehensively arrest this menace.

Key words: SALW, Africa, Solution

1. Introduction

The main cause of the Small Arms and Light Weapon (SALW) scourge that is currently visiting untold sufferings on the whole of the African continent and beyond was the cold war that took place between 1947 and 1991. This was a period of tense military posturing between powers in the Western bloc, comprising the United States of America and her North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies and those in the Eastern bloc, comprising the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries. The extent to which these two blocs, led by the United States on one hand and the Soviet Union on the other, armed themselves with nuclear weapons and other sophisticated military weapons and technology, technically prevented them from engaging in any direct military confrontations. Rather, the period saw the production and shipments of large volumes of weapons from these countries to several developing states to be used in what came to be known as the 'proxy wars' (Marsh, 2012).

After the end of the cold war in the early 90s, most countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South America ended up with huge stock piles of deadly weapons like anti aircraft batteries, AK 47s, land mines, mortars and assortments of recoil rifles and catches of endless supply of ammunitions. These arsenals which finally ended up in the hands of dictators, rebel groups and bandits, were the very ones used in the deadly conflicts that the continent witnessed in places like Angola, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and other places (United Nations, 1995). Because of the porous nature of most African countries, such weapons can be easily moved from one conflict theatre to other countries with relative ease. To a very large extent, these free flowing and easy to acquire SALW contribute to the destabilization of countries and whole regions. They also account for the perpetration of several unimaginable heinous crimes on the continent, resulting in the death of thousands of innocent people. With over 50,000 people armed with an assortment of SALW, the conflict in Liberia, for example, led to the death of about 150,000 people and made over 2.5 million people homeless (Smith, 1999). The availability and accumulation of SALW in one country or region (Kinsella, 2005), easily leads to the proliferation in neighboring countries or regions. This theoretical position of Kinsella, which is corroborated by others like Bavarn, explains how the flow and accumulation of SALW in Liberia contributed to the conflict in Sierra Leone (a neighbouring country). In his study on how these weapons could be exported from well regulated production jurisdictions like the US, Britain and Germany into conflict zones, Bourne was able to establish that, buyers usually provide false end-user certificates and other documentation to create a veil of legality for such ill-intended purchases (Bourne, 2012). Studies by Li and Wen on the utilization of SALW in selected regions of the world show a disturbing relationship between proliferation and general mortality levels (Li and Wen, 2005). Bartolucci and Kannevorff took this cluster of analysis deeper by examining the relationship between SALW and criminality. Findings from their study show a clear causal link between SALW, criminality and state fragility (Bartolucci and Kannevorff, 2012).

In recent times, the problems associated with the proliferation of SALW, especially in the West African Sub-region, have been seriously exacerbated by happenings in the Sahel. The fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 has resulted in the flow of large volumes of relatively more modern and sophisticated arsenals into the hands of several non state actors in the region. According to the September 20, 2011 edition of *the Guardian*, weapons like Russian made SA 24 missile launchers, SA7 shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles,

122mm Grad rockets and thousands of various rifle types were in the hands of non state actors in the Sahel. Most of these weapons were used by separatist groups like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in fuelling the recent conflicts in places like Mali. Armed with these weapons, activities of terrorist groups in the Sahel are on the ascendency and countries like Algeria and Nigeria have already begun to feel the impact. Latham (Latham, 1999) convincingly demonstrates that, the easy access to such lethal small arms and light weaponry by non state actors, lead to the undermining of traditional and modern institutions of human security and destroys established democratic governance. In general, Illicit SALWs help in sustaining the subversive and illegal activities of parallel institutions of governance and thwart progress towards the consolidation of democracy in a country. Studies have also established a very strong correlation between SALW proliferation and organized crime (Latham, 1999). This nexus is currently very evident in the Sahel region, where very well established criminal networks armed to the teeth with sophisticated SALW, control the routes for narcotic drugs entering Europe.

The essence of this paper is to add to the evolving pool of strategies aimed at finding a lasting solution to the SALW problem in Africa. According to the United Nations, SALWs constitute a broad range of weaponry, which can be classified into distinct categories as follows:

According to the United Nations (2005) definition, SALW are 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, excluding antique small arms and light weapons or their replicas. (Antique small arms and light weapons and their replicas are defined in accordance with domestic law. Antique small arms and light weapons do not include those manufactured after 1899).

Small Arms: These are 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.

Light weapons: These are 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, general purpose or universal machine guns, medium machine guns, heavy machine guns, rifle grenades, under-barrel grenade launchers and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles, man portable launchers of anti-tank missile and rocket systems, man portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems, and mortars of a caliber of less than 100 millimeters. Operationally, the major difference between the two categories of weaponry is that, those in the small arms range are portable and can be operated by one single individual, while it takes more than one individual or a crew to operate those in the light weapons category (United Nations, 2005).

Apart from the reasons already mentioned, several other factors account for the proliferation and preference of SALW on the African continent (Marsh, 2012). First, they are very portable and can be easily carried by an individual or a small crew from one place to the other without the use of any sophisticated machinery. In certain places, very rudimentary means like donkeys, horses and bulls are employed to facilitate the smuggling and rapid deployment of light weapons under very constraining circumstances (Klare, 1999). Second, currently, more than 30 countries are involved in the mass production of SALW onto the world market. The United States of America, Austria, Belgium, Germany and Italy export more than 100 million dollars worth of SALW and their accessories annually (SAS report, 2012). This kind of mass production makes the weapons readily available and less expensive to procure. Third, they can be easily concealed and used at any point in time. This ease in concealment gives their usage a tactical operational advantage over several other forms of weaponry because they can be easily smuggled to the theatre of operation. Fourth, unlike heavy and sophisticated weaponry such as armored tanks and aircraft systems, training for the effective use of SALWs take relatively very short periods. Fifth, they are generally very durable, robust, and require very little maintenance, making them suitable for usage in any kind of terrain. Sixth, they are very affordable, very effective and lethal in combat (Boot, 2006) and can deliver the expected destruction so far as targets are within their range.

In addition to the above-mentioned demand side factors, the severe proliferation of gun-making technology in all parts of the world is also making the problem worse. Apart from major producers like the United States and Russia, several other countries have now joined the league of manufacturers. Countries like South Africa, Israel, Pakistan, Indonesia and India are now major producers. Most of these countries started producing such weapons through licensing agreements with major manufacturers in Europe to satisfy the legitimate domestic needs of their armies, but have now turned into major global manufacturers and distributors (Klare, 1999). On the global stage, SALW manufacturing is a booming profit oriented enterprise that is simply operating based on the concepts of demand, supply and profit. This kind of orientation takes away any moral consideration on the part of the manufacturers and makes attempts at addressing the issue from the supply side very difficult and almost impossible. Basically, the primary objective of any manufacturer is to produce more, make them affordable and very lethal in order to protect the market share. For example, the new variants of the AK 47 assault rifle can house a rail mount for telescopes, fire up to 50 rounds under one minute when set to automatic discharge, and can accurately hit targets 400 meters away. Manufacturers are also coupling various SALWs capabilities into single smart units, giving them good precision, range and maximized destruction capabilities. These modern and relatively very lethal weapons are easily finding their way into the hands of non state actors like rebel groups, terrorist organizations, ethnic militias and separatist groups, who are using them to cause mayhem and instability in most parts of the continent.

2. Examples of key SALW Initiatives in Africa

Due to the dangers posed by these weapons, notable organizations like the United Nations, the African Union and other regional blocs have been pursuing various strategies aimed at arresting the situation. In 2000 the African Union (AU) came out with a strategy under the 'Bamako Declaration' on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons. This declaration was designed to have a common African front to address the issue of SALW proliferation, circulation and trafficking. The

key areas that the policy targeted included: the promulgation of requisite SALW laws in Member States to streamline the manufacturing, possession and use of SALW and their accompanying ammunitions; the keeping of records; and the jurisdictional marking of all SALW. The ECOWAS moratorium on the importation, exportation and manufacture of SALW was another bold initiative that was designed to address the problem associated with the proliferation. Adopted in October 1998, the moratorium lasted for three years, but achieved very little by way of success. This was primarily due to the fact that the document was crafted in a way that made implementation non-binding on Member States. Despite its relatively minimal success, the period saw countries putting in place the necessary institutional structures to address the SALW problem.

The United Nations Program of Action (UNPoA) on SALWs was unanimously adopted by member states in 2001. This document became the blue print used by most countries and regional blocs in crafting their SALW strategies. It provided guidelines for actions to be taken at the country as well as the regional levels, and highlighted the need for appropriate legislation and control mechanisms to be put in place. At the country level, the policy advocated for increased public awareness and recommended strict mechanisms for SALW stock pile management, tracking, and identification (United Nations, 2001).

In 2006, ECOWAS Member States agreed to convert the moratorium into a convention after it had failed to achieve the intended results. The convention, in my view, outlines very practical steps that could be taken to address the problem heads-on. Its main objectives were:

- To prevent and combat the excessive and destabilizing accumulation of small arms and light weapons within ECOWAS;
- To continue the efforts for the control of small arms and light weapon within ECOWAS;
- To promote trust between the Member States through concerted and transparent
- action on the control of small arms and light weapons within ECOWAS;
- To build institutional and operational capacities of the ECOWAS Executive Secretariat and the Member States in the efforts to curb the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, their ammunitions and other related materials; and
- Promote the exchange of information and cooperation among the Member States.

Article 3 of the convention expressly banned the transfer of SALWs within the sub-region as follows:

- Member States shall ban the transfer of small arms and light weapons and their manufacturing materials into their national territory or from/through their national territory.
- Member State shall ban, without exception, transfers of small arms and light weapons to Non-State Actors that are not explicitly authorized by the importing Member.

Another prudent initiative that was formulated by countries around the Great Lakes region and the horn of Africa was the Nairobi Protocol. The protocol came into force in 2005 after its adoption the previous year and saw some degree of concerted effort on the part the countries involved in the region to address the SALW challenge. The protocol was formulated to: (a) Prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit manufacturing of, trafficking in, possession and use of small arms and light weapons in the sub-region;(b) Prevent the excessive and destabilizing accumulation of small arms and light weapons in the sub-region; (c) Promote and facilitate information sharing and cooperation between the governments in the sub-region, as well as between governments, inter-governmental organizations and civil society, in all matters relating to the illicit trafficking and proliferation of small arms and light weapons;(d) Promote cooperation at the sub-regional level as well as in international fora to effectively combat the small arms and light weapons problem, in collaboration with relevant partners; and (e) Encourage accountability, law enforcement and efficient control and management of small arms and light weapons held by States and non State actors. Although the outlined vision was very noble, very little was achieved by way of impact and intensity of the proliferation did not abate. Around this same period, other regional blocs like the Southern African Economic Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECAS), also came out with their own SALW protocols, but collectively, all these strategies did not achieve any quantifiable impact by way of tangible results. They only led to the creation of official structures for the implantation of such SALW-centered policies and created jobs for people. In 2012, the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons, was unanimously endorsed by the global community during the General Assembly meeting in New York, on the 7th of September, 2012. This new programme was designed to enhance existing international cooperation and to foster a more comprehensive and concerted approach in the fight against the SALW problem. The approach was basically based on States properly controlling the production, sales and illegal usage of SALW. Despite all these initiatives, the problems associated with SALW are still lingering around, posing a big challenge to regional stability and human security. Contemporary realities like the impunity with which the Boko Haram insurgency is taking place in Northern Nigeria, the situation in the Sahel, as well as the numerous daily crimes being committed with SALW on the African continent clearly attest to the fact that a lot remains to be done.

3. Recommendations

In order to comprehensively tackle the SALW problem in Africa, countries should strengthen the institutions that are mandated to directly deal with matters relating to SALW. Appropriate budgetary allocations should be made available to facilitate the functions of such entities, and they should be made to operate as semi autonomous entities within the national security outfit with very clear and unambiguous mandates. Governments should also ensure that, prohibitive laws are enacted to make it very difficult for people to produce, procure or use SALW and very punitive measures should be instituted to ensure that such laws are not breached. Standards relating to stockpile management, marking and tracing should also be enhanced through the use of ICT and the continuous professional training of personnel who undertake such functions. Regional corporations in the form of intelligence sharing and expertise exchanges should also be encouraged. Garcia (Garcia, 2006) has demonstrated that arms dealers engage in three main sets

of activities, namely: wholesaling and retailing; brokering; and trafficking. Others like the transporting agents and the transporters, who physically move the arms to the final point of usage, are those who add up to complete this chain of criminality. Consequently, through triangulated intelligence gathering and cross boarder collaborations, State agencies should identify the people behind these set of interlinking activities and flush them out. This will weaken the supply and access to SALW and also make them very difficult and relatively expensive to procure. However, all these controls, preventive and regulatory measures should be in tune with internationally accepted norms, taking into consideration the right to self defense, the inalienable right of self-determination and the sovereignty of States.

Governments in the sub-region should embark on a more vigorous continues public education on SALW. One of the main reasons why law abiding citizens may want to procure guns could be due to the inability of the state to protect them. When this becomes the case, they will buy illicit weapons at any cost and from any source, so that they can protect themselves. In this light, governments should take practical steps to ensure that, matters relating to policing capacity deficits such as the lack of adequate personnel and equipments are addressed. Other 'demand' side issues that African governments should critically address are the causes of dissent and rebellions in African States. In my view, the systematic marginalization of sections of the society in most African states, and the absence of the practice of good governance has the tendency of galvanizing sections of the population into taking up arms and violently trying to resolve such social imbalances. The tenets of good governance: participation, accountability, inclusiveness, responsiveness, the rule of law, equity and transparency should be strictly adhered to and practiced by all governments.

4. Conclusion

SALW have been the driving force behind several conflicts in Africa and other parts of the world. The proliferations also facilitate the perpetration of several criminal activities, exacerbating the already precarious security conditions on the continent. All the recommendations outlined in this paper are very simple, feasible and practical. With the needed political will, their implementation will help make Africa a very safe continent to live in.

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