

Issue: Bringing peace and strengthening security in sub-Saharan Africa by targeting the trafficking of illegal arms.

Forum: GA1

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Introduction

Arms trafficking, also referred to as gun running, is the illegal smuggling of contraband weapons or ammunition. What constitutes as illegal trade in firearms varies widely, depending on local or national laws.¹ “Gun runners” have been active throughout modern history, for example the Larne gun-running in 1914 where Major Fred Crawford, with the help of the German Empire, landed almost 25.000 rifles to Irish Unionists on the shores of Ireland.² Arms trafficking has been on the rise throughout the 20th century, yet saw a decrease in overall trade after the 1980s. Since 2005, however, arms trafficking has been on the rise again, according to research done by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute(SIPRI).³

In April 2013, the United Nations General Assembly decisively adopted the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). The ATT sets out to stop the international transfer between states of weapons, munitions and related items when it is known that they would be used to commit or facilitate genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity. Major exporters include the United States, Russia, France, Germany and China. The largest importers include Saudi-Arabia, India, Egypt, Australia and Algeria. Despite the commitment to regulate irresponsible arms trade, many key exporters continue to sell arms to governments that commit serious human rights abuses.⁴

There is one region in the world, however, where there has been some success in decreasing arms-trade. That is sub-Saharan Africa. Africa’s arms imports account for 7.8% of the global share between 2014-2018. Of that 7.8%, 25% is imported in sub-Saharan Africa. Their arms imports decreased by 45% between 2009-2013 and 2014-2018. The top importers were Nigeria, Angola, Sudan, Cameroon and Senegal.⁵ The largest exporters to the region were Russia(28%), China(24%), Ukraine(8.3%), USA(7.1%) and France(6.1%). However, these statistics only account for the ‘legal’ arms trade. It is unclear to which extent illegal arms trade accumulates.

¹ <https://www.definitions.net/definition/ARMS+TRAFFICKING>

² <https://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/the-larne-gun-running-of-1914-11/>

³ https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/fs_1903_at_2018_0.pdf

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/08/killer-facts-2019-the-scale-of-the-global-arms-trade/>

⁵ https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/fs_1903_at_2018_0.pdf

Definition of Key Terms

Arms trafficking

“Arms trafficking, also known as gunrunning, is the illegal trafficking or smuggling of contraband weapons or ammunition. What constitutes legal trade in firearms varies widely, depending on local and national laws. The 1997 Report of the UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms provides a more refined and precise definition, which has become internationally accepted. This distinguishes between small arms, which are weapons designed for personal use, and light weapons, which are designed for use by several persons serving as a unit. Ammunition and explosives also form an integral part of small arms and light weapons used in conflict.”⁶

Small arms

“Portable firearms, especially rifles, pistols, and light machine guns.”⁷

Large arms

“Non-portable firearms, especially tanks, armoured vehicles, heavy machine guns”

General Overview

Sub-Saharan Africa has seen a turbulent chain of events during the twentieth century. To begin, following the second world war, colonial powers such as France and the United Kingdom started to grant independence to their colonies. Decolonisation, as this process is commonly referred to, happened primarily from 1950 till 1975. France and the UK were at first not really willing to cooperate with nationalists in Africa, as they wanted to continue their control over African resources. External pressure from the UN and the USA and internal pressure from nationalist movements eventually caused the decolonisation era in Africa.

However, the newly formed countries were installed with artificial political boundaries that were established by the European powers during the colonial era. These boundaries did not, and still do not reflect tribal and religious divisions. The newly formed fragile African states, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, were prone to conflicts.⁸ Often, this resulted in bloody conflicts such as the civil wars in Liberia(1989-1996 and 1999-2003), Sierra Leone(1991-2002), the First and Second Congo wars(1996-1997 and 1999-2003), the Angolan civil war(1975-2002) and the Rwandan Genocide(1994).

Sub-Saharan Africa has seen a decrease in armed conflicts since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, stability cannot be taken for granted. Despite improvement, there are still a significant number of armed conflicts and the risk of cross-border contamination is high.⁹ The risk of border contamination is high primarily due to the fact that the armed conflicts

⁶ <https://www.definitions.net/definition/ARMS+TRAFFICKING>

⁷ https://www.lexico.com/definition/small_arms

⁸ <https://www.apstudynotes.org/cornell/post-colonial-african-conflict/>

⁹ <https://economics.rabobank.com/publications/2015/december/sub-saharan-africa-politically-more-stable-but-still-fragile/>

happen between cultural or religious groups that expand across the artificial borders remnant from the colonial era. One of the major problems concerning the region are the long-standing rulers who have been in power for a large amount of time. Examples include Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe and Paul Kagame in Rwanda. An exit could threaten stability in the region, as we have seen in the Central African Republic where a peaceful change of power in 1993 was followed by a period of instability which resulted in two violent coup d'état's.¹⁰ It is unclear what the exit of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe in 2017 will mean for the stability of the country.

Arms trafficking played a significant role in African conflicts. In Liberia, small arms as well as large arms were shipped massively to both sides of the conflict. Leader of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia then sold these arms to neighbouring country Sierra Leone, after which they were used in the Sierra Leone civil war as well.¹¹

Why do arms traffickers choose sub-Saharan Africa, one of the poorest regions in the world, to sell their expensive weaponry? Due to a combination of the high level of corrupt politicians, lax financial systems, lots of physical space to store and transport the products and a large amount of centralised governments in Africa, traffickers can sell their contraband with less effort than elsewhere in the world.¹² Yet most importantly, the amount of conflicts plays the largest role, as without conflicts, demand for weapons would be much lower. Africa is also the home of a lot of precious natural resources, such as diamonds, that traffickers can easily sell in domestic markets. Militias trade these resources for arms. That way traffickers can circumvent the issue of transferring African currencies in their domestic currency and possibly causing suspicion from national authorities.

Major Parties Involved

Russia

As the largest exporter of arms to sub-Saharan Africa, Russia has a large influence over the region. Russian weapons such as the AK-47 are very popular for African militias as the weapons are easy to use and have a good quality, while the price is relatively low.

China

Together with Russia, China makes up for more than half of the imported arms to sub-Saharan Africa. Chinese defence contractor Norinco produces a lot of small arms used in African conflicts.

United Nations

As it is the international organisation responsible for peace and security, the UN is heavily involved in sub-Saharan Africa in the form of peacekeeping. As of May 2015, there were nine UN peacekeeping missions in Africa supported by more than eighty thousand troops and

¹⁰ <https://economics.rabobank.com/publications/2015/december/sub-saharan-africa-politically-more-stable-but-still-fragile/>

¹¹ African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies, Vol. 5, Nos.1 & 2, Jan. 2012, pp. 1-18.

¹² Thachuk, K. & Saunders, K. Eur J Crim Policy Res (2014) 20: 361. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-014-9247-5>

fifteen thousand civilians. The largest missions take place in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Darfur, South Sudan, and Mali. Meanwhile, the African Union leads a peacekeeping mission of more than twenty-two thousand troops and police in Somalia, known as AMISOM. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a bloc of fifteen countries, has a small UN-recognized mission in Guinea Bissau.¹³

France and the United Kingdom

The former colonial powers have often been involved in post-colonial conflicts in Africa. France has more recently intervened in conflicts in former colonies such as Côte d'Ivoire, Chad and Mali.¹⁴ Besides their involvement in the region, France and the UK are also large exporters of small arms.

African Union

The African Union is the successor of the Organisation of African Unity. Some of the key aims of the OAU were to encourage political and economic integration among member states and to eradicate colonialism and neo-colonialism from the African continent.¹⁵ The African Union has continued to work on these key aims and now primarily focuses on integration between the African States. As a major actor, the African Union can decrease the amount of conflicts due to artificially created borders between tribes and religious militias.

Timeline of Key Events

1950-1975	Era of decolonisation in sub-Saharan Africa
1989-2003	Era of civil wars in Liberia
1991-2002	Civil war of Sierra Leone
December 2009	Adoption of Resolution 64/48
April 3 rd 2013	UN General Assembly adopts the Arms Trade Treaty
December 24 th 2014	Arms Trade Treaty enters into force

Previous attempts to resolve the issue

A recent Security Council meeting stressed the importance of bringing a halt to illicit arms trade, stating that the illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons constituted a serious threat to peace and security around the world, contributing to instability, violence and insecurity while undermining development efforts. Their spread also contributed to terrorism and international organized crime.¹⁶ The latter issue has become increasingly important in not just Africa but the entire world with the rise of terrorist organisations such as ISIS, Boko Haram, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, Hamas.

¹³ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/peace-operations-africa>

¹⁴ <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/%EF%BF%BCconflict-and-conflict-resolution-in-africa/>

¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organisation_of_African_Unity

¹⁶ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc13126.doc.htm>

There have been some attempts at intergovernmental cooperation to decrease the cross-border sale of arms. So far the only relative successful result has been the Arms Trade Treaty. It entered into force on Christmas Eve 2014 and so far, 105 states have ratified the treaty, with another 32 states having signed the treaty without ratifying it yet.¹⁷ The ATT primarily focuses on states and what efforts they have to make to promote “safe” arms trades.

Possible Solutions

The Arms Trade Treaty has not been positively received by everyone. Its critique comes in three forms:

- An international treaty is not the right instrument to stop arms trade
- The treaty is reinforcing the power of western arms exporters and legitimising their questionable policies
- The treaty is not questioning arms production but on the contrary facilitates the arms industry.

The biggest achievement of the ATT was the implementation of a national control system that regulates the export of arms. Countries can then assess whether arms will be used to violate human rights, undermine peace and security or seriously undermine socio-economic development of the importing country. The interesting thing is that such a control system already exists in a lot of major exporters such as the United States and the European Union. Yet these countries continue to export their weapons to questionable destinations such as Saudi-Arabia, Pakistan and Israel. A possible solution could be to implement sanctions against countries that keep ignoring the national control system. At this stage, the ATT is nothing more than a piece of paper full of good intentions.¹⁸

Another solution focuses not on government actors but on private institutions. Arms trade is a matter of supply and demand. If you cannot restrict supply, why not look at demand? As concluded earlier, one of the major reasons sub-Saharan Africa is attractive for weapons trafficking is the large amount of conflicts in the region. There has been a negative correlation between conflicts and arms trade. One can argue that in order to decrease arms trade even more in the area, the UN has to focus on decreasing conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa.

Appendix/Appendices

- <https://www.mimunleiden.org>
- <https://www.amnesty.org>
- www.smallarmssurvey.org/home.html
- <https://ucdp.uu.se/exploratory>

¹⁷ https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=XXVI-8&chapter=26&clang=_en

¹⁸ <http://stopwapenhandel.org/node/1495>