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Tackling the Small Arms Problem: *Multilateral Measures and Initiatives*

Multilateral responses to the problem of small arms proliferation, at global, regional and sub-regional levels, have accelerated since 1997. Two of the most significant regional initiatives are the OAS firearms instruments and the West African Moratorium.

The Organization of American States has developed two instruments to combat the illicit trade in firearms. The Inter-American Convention, adopted in Washington in 1997, sets out operational and legal measures designed to 'prevent, combat, and eradicate' the illegal trade. It was followed by the adoption of the OAS Model Regulations in 1998, which harmonized procedures governing the movement of firearms and ammunition among OAS states. As of October 2000, ten of thirty-four OAS members had ratified the Convention, while six had adopted the Model Regulations. Central America, seriously affected by the proliferation of small arms, offers perhaps the clearest test for the OAS instruments.

In West Africa, the idea of a small arms moratorium grew out of conflict resolution initiatives in Mali in the 1990s. This culminated in the Declaration of a Moratorium on Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Light Weapons in West Africa, covering not only illicit transfers, but banning previously legal activity as well. The Declaration was endorsed in 1998, but only modest progress had been made in its implementation. While several states have applied for exemptions for specific arms transactions, in accordance with the Moratorium system, evidence of violations is growing, notably in relation to the conflict in Sierra Leone.

Multilateral activity on small arms has been taking place in other regions. In Southern Africa, the key initiative is the Southern Africa Regional Action Programme, formally endorsed at a joint ministerial of the European Union and the 14-member Southern African Development Community. Also under consideration is a Draft Protocol, encompassing such related issues as weapons marking, information exchange, corruption, and brokering. Unlike the Regional Action Programme, it would be legally binding.

The Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa were initially slow to act on the problem of small arms proliferation and misuse despite its severe impacts in the region. A recent breakthrough was the Nairobi Declaration, signed in March 2000. Significant progress is also being made at the operational level, as police in the region move to co-operate on illicit trafficking. Efforts to craft an African common approach to small arms have been attempted within the Organization of African Unity, through the Bamako Declaration, adopted in December 2000. This stresses the need for action by supplier countries, but acknowledges the demand side of the problem as well. It leaves implementation up to individual governments.

South Asia and the Middle East remain inactive on the question of small arms. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations has shown some willingness to discuss small arms, but acute aversion to outside interference in internal matters has limited the scope of these initiatives. So far, only those aspects of small arms related to transnational crime have been considered. Rather more progress has been achieved by Pacific Island nations.



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The Americas have played a pioneering role in the fight against small arms proliferation.

Evidence of Moratorium violations by some West African states, notably in relation to the Sierra Leone conflict, is mounting.

The EU Code of Conduct has been welcomed as an important first step in the development of responsible controls over the European arms trade.

In Europe, the European Union has been working on small arms issues since June 1997, when it passed a programme on illicit trafficking. Although this dealt exclusively with the illicit trade, the 1998 EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports was directed at legal transfers, with an emphasis on human rights aspects. A lack of transparency, however, makes it difficult to evaluate implementation. An EU Joint Action, approved in late 1998, specifically addresses the reduction of destabilizing accumulations of small arms. Implementation to date has focused on just a few countries, including Albania and Cambodia.

Trans-Atlantic institutions have also begun to recognize the importance of the issue, especially since the 1997 Albanian crisis and the Kosovo war of 1999. NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council stresses stockpile management and small arms control in the context of peace missions. In November 2000, the OSCE adopted a Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons, which included measures targeting the issues of supply, stockpile management, conflict prevention, and post-conflict rehabilitation.

UN activity has come from two directions. Under the auspices of the UN Crime Commission, work began in 1999 on a legally binding Firearms Protocol. Based on the OAS Convention, this instrument seeks to 'prevent, combat and eradicate' illicit firearms through the development of international standards in certain areas. The other side of UN activity has generated a series of government experts' reports and studies, as well as the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, which meets in New York in July 2001.

There is substantial cross-fertilization occurring between the various measures and initiatives launched in recent years.

While multilateral activity on small arms has accelerated in advance of the UN Conference, implementation has lagged, making it difficult to analyze what works best. Preliminary assessment reveals the importance of: 1) practical implementation mechanisms, designed in collaboration with those agencies that will be responsible for their implementation; 2) addressing the shortfalls in human and financial resources that prevent many countries from fully implementing small arms measures; and 3) uniform political commitment and conditions of peace and stability in relevant regions.

Multilateral activity on small arms issues, with its different levels, actors, and approaches, is clearly in its infancy. Much remains to be done, yet as illustrated throughout this chapter, significant progress has already been achieved.

For further information and current developments on small arms issues please check our website at www.smallarmssurvey.org