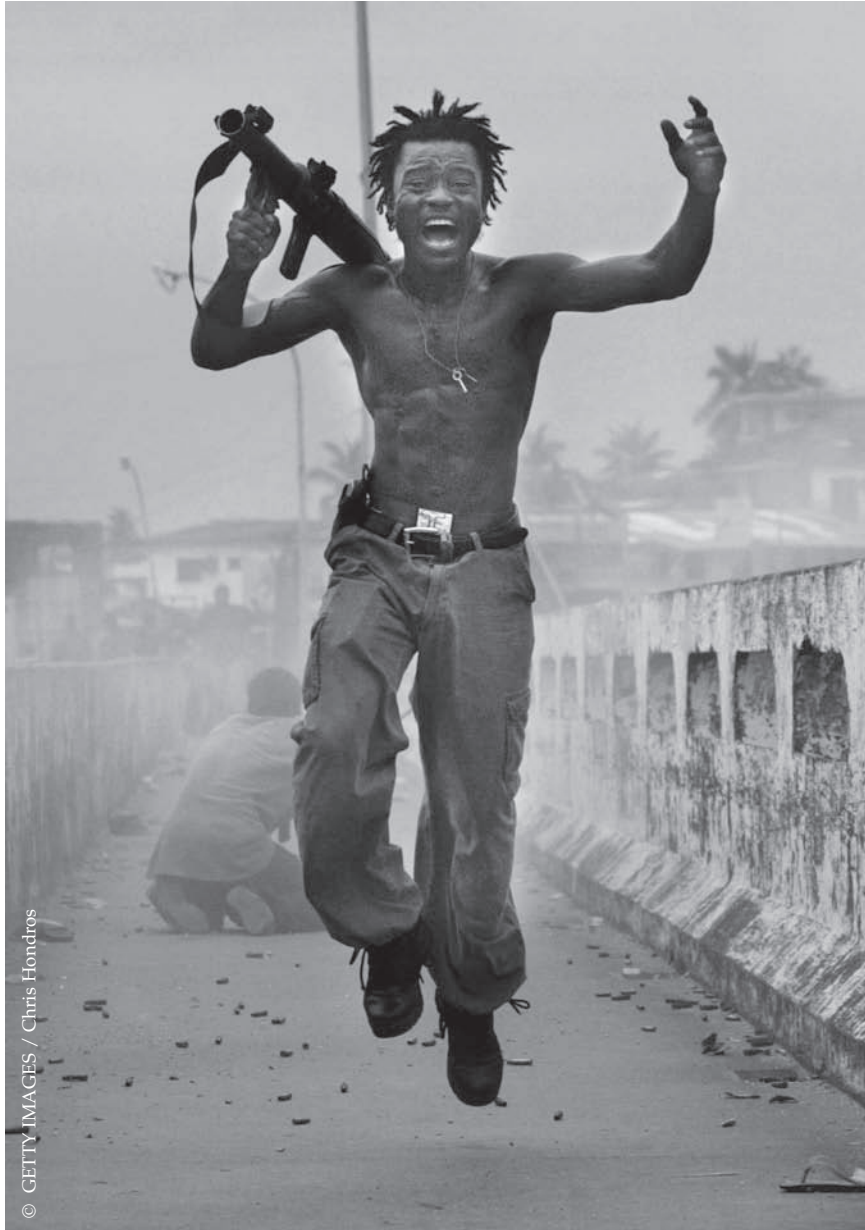


ARMED AND AIMLESS



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A Liberian militia commander loyal to the government exults after firing a rocket-propelled grenade at rebel forces at a key strategic bridge on 20 July 2003 in Monrovia, Liberia.

# CONCLUSION

*By Eric G. Berman and Nicolas Florquin*

The 35 armed groups operating in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region examined here are only the tip of the iceberg. If individual groups acting under an umbrella organization—such as the Young Patriots in Côte d’Ivoire—were included, the list would be significantly longer. In Nigeria, many of the hundred or so ‘cults’ active in Rivers state (see Chapter 1) would qualify as small-sized armed groups involved in low-level criminality—activities with which this study does not concern itself. Despite this, many would nevertheless meet the criteria for inclusion, but because of time constraints and difficulties documenting their activities they have not been taken into account. Moreover, several are not identifiable by name or do not regularly meet or conduct operations. This, however, does not make them any less deadly. Prominent examples include religious-based groups in the Nigerian state of Plateau, the Arab and Kounta tribes in Mali, and various ethnic groups such as the Fulani and Gourmantches in Burkina Faso as well as Hausa farmers and nomadic cattle herders in Niger.

## *A growing and persistent threat to security*

Armed groups are active in a majority of ECOWAS countries and represent a clear threat to regional and human security. Since 1998, these groups have been operational in fully two-thirds of the 15 ECOWAS member states: Côte d’Ivoire, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali,<sup>1</sup> Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. They consist of pro-state, anti-state, and a wide range of vigilante groups established to safeguard various financial (both individual and commercial), religious, communal, and ethnic interests. Most were established after 1998.

While approximately half the militias examined were demobilized or considered defunct as of December 2004, many could be remobilized at short notice. For example, the Kamajor militia—a traditional hunting society associated with the now defunct Sierra Leone Civil Defence Force (CDF)—could once again take up arms should the Sierra Leone Special Court find its former leader guilty of war crimes. Furthermore, the command structures of former Liberian insurgent groups appear wholly intact despite the advanced stage of the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process now under way in that country (see Chapter 4).

In 2004, regional instability contributed to the migration of more than 2.7 million people, an estimated half of whom were internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>2</sup> Armed groups, whether politically neutral, pro-state, or anti-state, represent a continuous threat to human security in general and to vulnerable migrant populations in particular. Militias attack and infiltrate refugee and IDP camps and forcibly recruit occupants for combat and other duties (see Chapter 5). Several tens of thousands of children have been press-ganged into rebel groups fighting in the Mano River Union (MRU) alone (see Chapter 6). Adult group members often sexually abuse and exploit children and women associated with fighting sources,<sup>3</sup> attack civilians, and engage in widespread human rights violations.

### *Armed and aimless*

Regardless of their original motives, armed groups can quickly become aimless—but remain no less deadly. They have a dangerous tendency to shift allegiances or to morph from groups originally established to support law and order to those that actively undermine it. Original ‘ideology’ tends to evaporate rapidly in the face of temptations to engage in financial or political aggrandizement—usually at the point of a gun. Ostensibly formed in support of the state, many armed groups—such as the Young Volunteers and Young Patriots in Guinea and Côte d’Ivoire—may evolve into genuine threats to national and regional security.

A key concern is their unpredictability, which—when coupled with training and access to guns—can transform former members into lethal guns for hire. Governments, rebel groups, or political parvenus can hire former combatants to fight on their behalf or as mercenaries in neighbouring countries. In some cases, armed mercenaries even turn against their erstwhile benefactors to pursue their own political or monetary objectives. There are many examples of local politicians using originally apolitical groups for personal and nefarious purposes.

Perhaps the most critical argument in favour of continued vigilance is that it is disaffected youth that comprise most of today’s regional armed groups. In 2000, fully 45 per cent of West Africa’s population were less than 15 years old (UN, 2004). Lack of economic development and widespread unemployment make membership of an organized armed group a particularly attractive option for the region’s idle youth. Given this context, it is hardly surprising that as many as 150,000 young Ivoirians have joined the Young Patriots and are eager to participate in—often violent—protests for just a few dollars. The majority (60 per cent) of children and youth interviewed in the three MRU countries maintained they

had voluntarily joined armed groups primarily because it represented their best—if not only—opportunity to ‘earn’ a living (see Chapter 6).

### ***The link to small arms***

Gangs of untrained, inexperienced youth would be less threatening were it not for easy access to a wide variety of small arms and light weapons. While the black market price of weapons was not the focus of this study, various sources suggest that assault rifles in the West African region can cost several hundred dollars. This, however, appears to be no obstacle. Indeed, most groups usually possess the requisite funds to procure whatever they desire.

Less resourceful groups are making use of craft hunting rifles and foreign knock-offs now being produced region-wide. Craft-produced firearms used to be largely limited to ungainly-looking pistols and rudimentary shotguns. Local artisans in Ghana are moving towards producing reverse-engineered assault rifles, and they are sharing their expertise with blacksmiths elsewhere in the continent (see Chapter 3). Artisanal gun-making and small-scale arms smuggling are becoming increasingly profitable businesses.

More worryingly, they are acquiring not only pistols and assault rifles but sophisticated weapon systems as well. Indeed, during the 1990s and early part of the twenty-first century, at least four armed groups—the Mouvement patriotique de Côte d’Ivoire (now Forces nouvelles), the Rassemblement des forces démocratiques de Guinée, Liberians United for Reconstruction and Democracy (LURD), and the Revolutionary United Front—reportedly possessed man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS) capable of attacks on military and civil aviation.

### ***Neglected stockpiles***

In spite of international initiatives designed to curb foreign supply, such as the ECOWAS *Moratorium on Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Light Weapons in West Africa*, the smuggling of weapons from international sources continues to make headlines. For the vast majority of groups, however, the recirculation of existing stockpiles—in particular of official state-owned weapons—through theft, seizure, and corruption is a primary source of armament. State-owned weapons often make their way into the hands of Nigerian groups (see Chapter 1) and elsewhere, frequently with the help of corrupt politicians or members of the security forces.

It is imperative that rigorous and transparent stockpile management and security accompany supply-side initiatives. Despite representing a significant weapons source, little information is available regarding weapons possessed or captured by state security forces. The Guinean government's destruction of 22,000 weapons in late 2003, including 278 MANPADS, is an exception. State stockpiles need special scrutiny and monitoring owing to the risk of seizure or theft. Reports that the Groupe Salafiste pour la prédication et le combat (GSPC) acquired surface-to-air missiles during its stay in Mali (see Chapter 2) indicate that there exists a regional trade and market even for these technologically sophisticated weapons—found in the official arsenals of Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Nigeria (IISS, 2004).

Despite repeated violations of measures aimed at curbing weapon transfers, monitoring and controlling today's arms flows—including legal transfers—will reduce the likelihood of future arms seizures and theft. Stricter controls over ammunition might be even more successful. Ammunition will deteriorate if not stored carefully and new supplies are constantly required to support combat. In Liberia, LURD had to retreat and postpone its final attack on Monrovia until it received new mortar shells (HRW, 2003b, pp. 2–3). In the early 1990s, ammunition scarcity pushed Malian rebels to adopt strict codes of conduct to avoid wasting bullets, resulting in fewer criminal attacks on civilians (see Chapter 2). Finally, Ghanaian gunsmiths design their guns based on the imported ammunition available on the open market; they do not produce their own ammunition but adapt their products to what is readily available (see Chapter 3).

### *Disarmament in West Africa*

The degree to which arms proliferation drives conflict is revealed by the growing energy with which international organizations, governments, and NGOs are seeking to remove weapons from West Africa. DDR programmes have been implemented in Liberia, Mali, Niger, and Sierra Leone; more are planned for Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal. Other initiatives, such as weapons for development (WfD) programmes, and voluntary gun collection projects have been carried out in Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. Governments also confiscated weapons from criminals and traffickers.

These arms collection initiatives have produced mixed results. Between 1998 and 2004, personnel successfully collected or seized more than 200,000 small arms region-wide, at least 70,000 of which were subsequently destroyed. The quality of

those weapons destroyed is questionable, however, and implies that better models are being recirculated. While the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) eliminated all 27,000 firearms it collected, loose selection and screening processes contributed to the participation of more than 100,000 Liberians—including many non-combatants—in the DDR programme, pushing it into a funding crisis.

Although WfD programme personnel have collected rather small numbers of weapons, their contribution to development and conflict resolution is only beginning to be understood. Small, targeted initiatives such as the Canadian training of local Mixed Brigades to patrol and restore security in Guinea's refugee camps also illustrate what can be done with limited resources. Attempts by Ghanaian civil society to start a transparent dialogue between traditional gunsmiths and the authorities are both ambitious and sincere. ECOWAS plans to strengthen its small arms moratorium by turning it into a legally binding convention demonstrate continued commitment to controlling arms transfers and combating the proliferation of illicit weapons. Even stronger determination will be necessary to bring about real and lasting change.



West Africa is at a crossroads. On the one hand are small but hopeful signs of progress. On the other, the seemingly intractable social and economic problems that gave rise to conflict in the first place remain. Although there have been some improvements, the combination of high youth unemployment, demographic bulges, and the ready availability of small arms is a serious cause for concern. Moreover, the region's history shows that violence is contagious and that 'spillover' is common. Furthermore, several critical upcoming elections have the potential to trigger yet another round of violence and, with it, tremendous suffering—as witnessed in Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria. If current efforts to contain and disarm armed groups are not stepped up, history could judge the period of this study as a relatively quiet interlude in a destructive cycle of unremitting violence. Today's armed and aimless youth could well be the spark that ignites tomorrow's conflagration.

## List of abbreviations

CDF	Civil Defence Force
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
GSPC	Groupe Salafiste pour la prédication et le combat
IDP	Internally displaced person
LURD	Liberians United for Reconstruction and Democracy
MANPADS	Man-portable air defence systems
MRU	Mano River Union
UNMIL	United Nations Mission in Liberia
WfD	Weapons for development

## Endnotes

- 1 Although Mali has no armed group entry in the book, it is listed here because of the recent incursions of the Algerian Groupe Salafiste pour la prédication et le combat (GSPC) in the north of the country (see Chapter 2).
- 2 The 2.7 million people comprised 1,330,000 IDPs, 620,000 returning migrants, 360,000 returning refugees, 340,000 refugees, and 67,500 third-country nationals (UNOCHA, 2004, p. 9).
- 3 Whereas this study gives only limited coverage of issues of sexual abuse by armed groups, other organizations such as Human Rights Watch have reported extensively on the subject. See, for instance, HRW (2003a).

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