

Revealing Provenance

WEAPONS TRACING DURING AND AFTER CONFLICT

Weapons are evidence. Most carry marks that, combined with their structural characteristics, identify them uniquely. If they can be identified uniquely, their ownership history may be traced and the point at which they were diverted into the illicit sphere revealed. Weapons tracing can help uncover illicit supply channels, providing a firm basis for disrupting such trade and prosecuting those involved in it.

This chapter explores the process and promise of weapons tracing in conflict and post-conflict situations. It is designed as a practical guide to the tracing of small arms, light weapons, and their ammunition in conflict and post-conflict settings. Its principal conclusions include the following:

- Between 1998 and 2008, the international community spent USD 2.3 billion on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) and other initiatives designed to address the problem of illicit small arms proliferation.
- About 75 per cent of United Nations and associated weapons collection records reviewed for this chapter are too ambiguous to allow for weapons tracing.
- There is no evidence to suggest that any of the 330,000 weapons registered during these initiatives have been comprehensively analysed to ascertain their types and origins.

Tracing basics

The United Nations has defined small arms tracing as the

systematic tracking of illicit small arms and light weapons found or seized on the territory of a State from the point of manufacture or the point of importation through the lines of supply to the point at which they became illicit.

The first step in any tracing operation is to identify the weapon of interest uniquely on the basis of its physical characteristics and markings. Then, with the cooperation of the states that manufactured and imported the weapon, the second step is to track changes in ownership through available documentary records. The ultimate, but often elusive, goal of weapons tracing is to identify the point in the transfer chain at which the legal weapon entered the illicit market. The three pillars of marking, record-keeping, and cooperation are essential to successful tracing.

Marking: Unmarked weapons cannot be identified uniquely. While a weapon's design may enable interested parties to identify its manufacturer, marks indicating the manufacturer and country of manufacture are usually indispensable.

In all cases, the presence of a unique serial number allows one weapon to be distinguished from hundreds or thousands of others that may have been produced at a particular factory. Moreover, if countries mark the weapons that they import, tracing efforts are far more likely to succeed.

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Few states, however, mark military weapons in ways that would allow a non-expert to identify the manufacturer. Although they have a legal obligation to import-mark weapons, few of the 74 signatories to the UN Firearms Protocol do so.

Figure 3.8 Iraqi import mark on a Russian-manufactured AKM



© James Bevan. Weapon courtesy of Royal Armouries, UK

Table 3.7 Numbers of traceable weapons listed in records collated by UN agencies

Programme	Implementing agency	Number of weapons recorded*	Number of traceable weapons**	Percentage of traceable weapons
Republic of Congo (2006)	UN Development Programme	1,308	0	0.0
Liberia (2004)	UN Mission in Liberia	21,630	5,490	25.4
Kosovo (2000-02)	UN Development Programme, Kosovo Police Service	4,867	1,455	29.9
Total/average		27,805	6,945	25.0

* Figures exclude ammunition and ancillary items.

** The number of weapons that were recorded in sufficient detail to make a tracing request (without guarantee of success)—including model (and, or by extension, manufacturer) and serial number. The numbers are generous because they include some records that have multiple, successive serial numbers but no model designation—on the assumption that, with considerable research, the manufacturer of the weapons could probably be identified.

Sources: Republic of Congo: email correspondence with Hervé Gonsolin, CTP Armes Légères et Violence Armée, UNDP Burundi-BINUB, 2 September 2008; Liberia: UNMIL (2005); Kosovo: KPIS (2002)

Record-keeping: Key elements of a weapon's history—in particular, changes in ownership—must be recorded for tracing to be possible. Records must be accurate, comprehensive, and retrievable if investigators are to have any chance of piecing together the weapon's history. Essential information includes the weapon type and model, its serial number, and the party to which it was transferred.

Cooperation in tracing: Even if the necessary marking and record-keeping requirements have been met, tracing efforts will be brought to a swift halt if the countries of manufacture or import—or trading entities within those countries—do not cooperate with tracing requests. After having identified the weapon uniquely, an investigator seeking tracing assistance typically approaches the countries of manufacture and import for help. Sometimes investigators contact relevant trading companies directly. Thereafter they follow the record-keeping chain forward in time—if possible to the point at which the weapon was diverted to the illicit sphere.

There is, however, no comprehensive mechanism to facilitate conflict trace requests. When organizations or groups such as UN sanctions panels require information on weapon transfers to conflict zones, they tend to make ad hoc requests to national governments, export agencies, manufacturers, or other entities. The results are mixed. At present, a lack of cooperation by manufacturers and states is the norm rather than the exception. Between 2006 and 2007, for instance, states responded to only around 30 per cent of UN sanctions panels' tracing requests.

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Conflict tracing would prove more successful if major weapons-producing or exporting states cooperated more closely with local, regional, or UN-mandated investigators. Enhanced cooperation could be incorporated into existing law enforcement agreements at regional or international levels. Among other things, such agreements would specify the modalities for accessing and using sensitive information.

Conclusion

Despite more than a decade of attention to small arms identification and tracing, the international community has yet to make significant use of weapons tracing in conflict and post-conflict contexts. Organizations with post-conflict peacekeeping or disarmament mandates, such as the UN, devote very little attention to monitoring, recording, and tracing weapons.

The international community, more generally, has given little thought to the value of weapons tracing or how to improve international cooperation with respect to tracing requests. Efforts to control the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons need to be founded upon firm evidence of illicit trade and its specific dynamics. The weapons themselves can often provide such evidence—but only if organizations record weapons information comprehensively and states and commercial entities cooperate fully with tracing requests. ■