



# Curbing the Crisis:

## Tackling Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation for Global Security and Development

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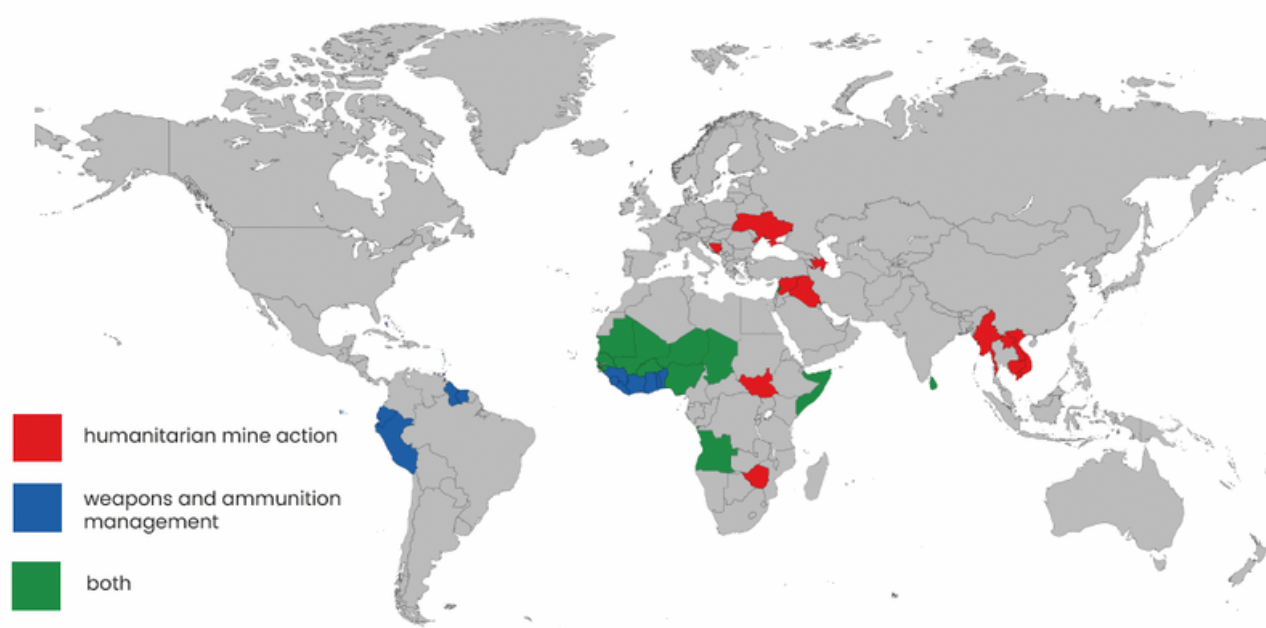


## Summary

Easy availability of small arms and light weapons and ammunition has a devastating impact on the safety and wellbeing of people and communities and threatens both personal and national security. High levels of illicit ownership and circulation fuels criminality and conflict. Protracted situations of armed violence drive even greater demand for firearms, causing long-term economic damage and impeding development and recovery. The international trade in illegal weapons is also part of a complex picture of transnational organised crime that intersects with the narcotics trade and other forms of trafficking to undermine regional and global stability. Effective arms control measures are essential to curb this worsening problem and its multiple negative effects.

There are practical measures that can be taken to help prevent the diversion, proliferation, and misuse of firearms and ammunition and reduce the risk of armed violence. Providing secure storage for security sector institutions, including the military and police, destroying surplus and unsafe stockpiles, training personnel in appropriate handling, and marking and tracing weapons are just a few of the measures that can play a role in reducing these risks. These programmes act as confidence-building measures for building transformational partnerships between governments and implementing partners, and can serve as building blocks for further peacebuilding initiatives.

This briefing draws on the practical experience of MAG's expert teams across Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Asia-Pacific region and the Middle East, to make the case for increased support to address the threat of small arms and light weapons and reduce the risk of armed violence.



## The Global Toll of Small Arms and Light Weapons

The past decade has seen a global increase in the intensity and impact of conflict and armed violence on civilians, with more than 200,000 firearms-related deaths each year. More than half of all homicides are committed using firearms; during 2020, small arms and light weapons were the cause of 27% of civilian deaths<sup>[1]</sup>.

In situations of violence, citizens are deprived of rights that many of us take for granted, such as employment, education, healthcare, and personal safety. Uncontrolled proliferation of small arms and light weapons can trigger cycles of heightened insecurity, driving more civilians to acquire weapons – legally or illegally – in response to their fears.

In regions affected by conflict, such as the Lake Chad Basin in West Africa, small arms and light weapons are used by non-state armed groups to maintain control over territories and communities. Security outposts and weapons and ammunition storage facilities are looted to arm and strengthen non-state armed groups and criminal organisations. Without adequate capacity and resources, state security actors are unable to effectively respond to these threats. States face challenges of weak capacity and corruption, undermining governance and democracy.

Even outside situations of conflict, armed violence affects security and stability.

This includes many Commonwealth partners in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Islands, and extends to the UK's Overseas Territories. In October 2022, the UK Government increased support – including the deployment of 24 firearms officers – to the Turks & Caicos Islands following a surge in gang violence that saw 15 fatal shootings in the preceding month<sup>[2]</sup>. This made the Islands the deadliest country per capita that year<sup>[3]</sup>.

Almost none of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be achieved without action to address the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The international community has committed to end gender-based violence by 2030 (SDG5), but this ambition will remain out of reach while weapons continue to be used to perpetrate femicide and incidents of sexual violence. Peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG16) can only be achieved by significantly reducing illicit arms flows and combating all forms of organised crime, including weapons trafficking. And people are unable to enjoy good health and well-being (SDG3) while the threatened and actual use of weapons persists. Sufficient national capacity and resources are essential to address these challenges.

[1] <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/goal-16>

[2] <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-step-up-help-to-combat-caribbean-crimewave>

[3] <https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crime-2022-homicide-round-up/>





## The Impact of Armed Violence

Despite having tight gun control laws, illicit firearms and ammunition are widespread in the Caribbean. The rate of violent deaths in this region is almost three times the global average - including high rates of violent deaths among women[4]. The link to weapons proliferation is clear: firearms are used in more than half of all homicides in every country in the region. This figure rises to 90% in some countries.

The toll of violence impacts economies and health systems too. Treating a single gunshot victim costs up to 11 times more than the average per capita healthcare budget; while medical costs and productivity losses due to firearm-related violence amounted to at least \$49 million in the Bahamas, \$12 million in Barbados, and \$135 million in Jamaica. Other costs are harder to quantify, though they have a significant impact on societies – the everyday fear of crime, a lack of trust in institutions, and a weakening of the social fabric of countries and communities.

Source:

<https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/CARICOM-IMPACS-SAS-Caribbean-Firearms-Study.pdf>

## Preventing Proliferation and Reducing Armed Violence

It has been estimated that over the next decade, more than a million lives globally could be saved through decisive action on armed violence and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons<sup>[5]</sup>. Controlling the instruments of armed violence that fuel conflict and crime can save lives, make communities safer and more peaceful, and accelerate efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Diversion from state-held stocks is a significant source of illicit arms, with police and military weapons and ammunition often recovered in seizures, found at crime scenes, or used in terrorist incidents. These weapons are vulnerable to pilfering and theft due to insufficient physical security, while the risk of systemic corruption increases where oversight is weak. Closing these gaps disrupts the sources that criminal networks and other malign actors rely on, curtailing their ability to arm themselves and finance their activities through trafficking.

Practical measures include construction and rehabilitation of storage facilities, including both armouries and ammunition depots. Additional security measures include, for example, lockable gun racks and cabinets, which present additional barriers to theft and facilitate easy physical inventory. By improving processes for transparency and record keeping, personnel are more easily held accountable for weapons and ammunition issued to them. Improving record keeping, including digitalisation of paper records, allows incidents of diversion to be more easily identified and the causes addressed to prevent future occurrences. Weapons marking provides an additional accountability measure which supports forensic analysis, including international tracing via Interpol. Weapons destruction is a key element of accountable management and is particularly critical in terms of preventing re-diversion of seized and surrendered weapons.

[5] [https://www.maginternational.org/media/filer\\_public/4b/9b/4b9bb8ae-28d9-454f-8ed4-d02fb7be1be9/sierra\\_leone\\_arms\\_control\\_-\\_partnership\\_and\\_progress\\_digital.pdf](https://www.maginternational.org/media/filer_public/4b/9b/4b9bb8ae-28d9-454f-8ed4-d02fb7be1be9/sierra_leone_arms_control_-_partnership_and_progress_digital.pdf)

Engaging with communities to promote safe practices and behaviours can have a positive impact in reducing the risk of armed violence and changing the way that people view and use weapons. Risk education builds awareness about the risks of storing and handling weapons, and how to avoid misuse. The trust built with national authorities also provides entry points to build understanding of non-violent conflict resolution within security forces.

The partnerships and trust built through these programmes can serve as building blocks for further peacebuilding, and support governments in meeting their obligations to address weapons diversion under international frameworks such as the Arms Trade Treaty<sup>[6]</sup>, a key framework on which the UK took a lead negotiating position. As a nation that exports arms, the UK has a responsibility to uphold the Treaty in terms of mitigating the potential risks of transfers – not only of diversion, but also around international humanitarian law, human rights, and socioeconomic development.

Arms control measures contribute to obligations under the Firearms Protocol, a key component of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime. And, within the UN framework, the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons<sup>[7]</sup> is an important political instrument that the UK can support and strengthen, demonstrating leadership as a permanent member of the Security Council.

[6] <https://thearmstradetreaty.org/>

[7] Fully titled "The UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects"

## How Radio Shows in Somaliland Encouraged Safer Behaviours

An innovative radio drama launched by MAG in Somaliland reached almost 1.5 million women, men, girls and boys with life-saving safety messages. The drama has also driven an almost 300 per cent increase in the number of men and women registering their previously-unregistered guns.

MAG has worked in Somalia and Somaliland since 2007, where the illicit proliferation and misuse of weapons fuel ongoing conflict in the region and leads to scores of preventable deaths every year. Most households in Somalia and Somaliland own at least one firearm, according to the latest estimates. Weapons are often stored and loaded and within reach of children. In Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, gunshot wounds are the fourth most common reason for being admitted to hospital — and the second most likely cause of death.

“As a result of the educational awareness campaign, many men and women are now openly talking about the risks of small weapons,” Mohamed Ahmed, Director of Security at the Somaliland Ministry of Interior, said. “I was amazed by questions and inquiries raised by the citizens when I attended, as guest speaker, for the two call-in shows. The Somaliland Ministry of Interior welcomes the programme and wishes to continue to influence even more individuals to register their weapons.”



Caption: radio drama actors at Radio Hargeisa





## Armed Violence and Climate Change

Armed violence and the effects of trafficking and organised crime interact with, and act as a multiplier effect for, the consequences of climate change. Among coastal communities affected by erosion of land resources and damage to fisheries, competition over resources drives intercommunal violence and increased criminality as people turn to piracy or illicit trafficking of narcotics, arms, and people, to replace lost sources of income. Rising sea levels, high water tables, and soil erosion threatens the infrastructure of coastal armouries and ammunition depots, and degradation of ammunition caused by saltwater increases the risk of unplanned explosions.

Extreme weather induced by climate change threatens basic accountability and inventory management where storage facilities are vulnerable to fire, high winds, and flooding – including paper-based record keeping which can be destroyed during such crises. Furthermore, damage to weapons and ammunition held as evidence, or the associated records, risks undermining the chain of evidence and failure of critical prosecutions associated with transnational organised crime - an issue for a number of Caribbean states in particular.

## Preventing the Risk of Unplanned Explosions

There is a serious risk of unplanned explosions from improper storage of munitions, commercial explosives and pyrotechnics – which are often stored close together. Remedial work, including destruction of unsafe stocks, training, and improvements to infrastructure, is an essential preventative action. Accidental detonations result in a substantial blast zone, often several kilometres in radius, and as the world becomes increasingly urbanised, local populations settle even closer to explosive storehouses. The Mpila ammunition depot explosion in Congo-Brazzaville in 2012 killed at least 300 people, injured 2,500, left more than 121,000 homeless, and caused USD 672 million in economic damage<sup>[8]</sup>. More recently, in August 2020, the detonation of ammonium nitrate at the Port of Beirut caused at least 218 deaths, injured 7,000 and destroyed the homes of 300,000 people, with enormous long-term consequences for Beirut's economy and stability. MAG's work to improve storage and management of explosive materials helps to reduce the risk of unplanned explosions and protect communities, at a fraction of the human and financial cost of responding to a disaster.



Caption: The immediate aftermath of the tragedy in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo

[8] <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Small-Arms-Survey-2014-Chapter-5-EN.pdf>

## Key Recommendations for Action

The UK Government should:

- Ensure conventional arms control is considered as an integral part of strategies to prevent and reduce conflict and armed violence.
- Focus on supporting partner states to build their national capacity to ensure long-term, coordinated, and effective management of weapons and ammunition.
- Support Member States of the Commonwealth to strengthen arms control, particularly those most affected by armed violence and organised crime.
- Promote increased coordination between states to address cross-border violence, and establish comprehensive and collaborative frameworks of action that align with national frameworks and international agendas including Women, Peace and Security.
- Use the UK's diplomatic weight to promote international arms control, such as making explicit reference to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and the impacts on communities, in national statements at international conferences, including the Fourth Review Conference of the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons and the 4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States in 2024, and within associated Political Declarations and Action Plans.
- Involve local and national actors in the design and implementation of interventions on conflict prevention and armed violence reduction. This will require active engagement and consultation via embassies with key partners, with a clear expectation that local actors are demonstrably active stakeholders.





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