

# **The Human Cost of Small Arms**

**An Oxfam International paper for  
the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms  
and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects  
July 2001**

## Key Recommendations

1. Oxfam International has undertaken a series of studies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda and the Philippines to research what price small arms are exacting from communities living in conflict areas. Whilst it has been generally accepted that small arms proliferation has a very damaging effect on people, very little research data has been available to elucidate the link between small arms and human suffering. For the first time, Oxfam's studies put a human face to the full cost of small arms. Our findings show that unregulated weapons in irresponsible hands have produced massive human rights violations, injured the welfare of individuals and communities, seriously setback sustainable development and exacerbated conflict. The threat of the gun is comparable to landmines as both result in land-denial. Farming communities are too scared to tend their fields for fear of falling victim to unpredictable assault by armed groups operating in their area. Crops are left to rot, planting seasons are missed and the people are forced to rely on relief aid to survive.
2. In recognition of the fact that the proliferation of small arms has become a major humanitarian problem, United Nations member states must set their sights higher than the limited agenda they have formulated for the UN Conference and take bold steps to reverse the trend in uncontrolled flows and use of arms. All governments must take responsibility for controlling arms flows both within and through their jurisdiction and by their citizens.
  - States must set binding new international standards for responsible arms transfers, preventing the export of weapons where there is a risk that they will be used to commit serious violations of human rights or international humanitarian law, or where they would fuel conflict, or undermine sustainable development.
  - Accountability for small arms exports should be promoted by the introduction of an international marking and tracing regime.
  - A convention regulating the activities of brokers and traffickers should be agreed to prevent unscrupulous dealers from evading controls.
  - But steps to regulate the supply of weapons will do little to improve the situation of the ordinary man, woman and child in zones of conflict unless action is also taken to address the reasons why people resort to the gun. In partnership with civil society, states should tackle the underlying factors in the demand for weapons including insecurity, poverty, lack of access to justice, and inequitable access to resources.
  - States should make stringent efforts to collect, decommission and destroy weapons already in circulation.
3. The challenges that lie ahead are immense, but the consequences of inactivity are unacceptable. The degree of commitment from states to tackle small arms proliferation will help decide whether the twenty-first century is one where the numbers of victims of small arms continues to escalate; or whether it is a century where states join together for the mutual benefit of their people and stem the uncontrolled flow of small arms.

## Counting the cost

4. The first three locations chosen for Oxfam's case studies on the human cost of small arms are all characterized by high levels of armed violence.
  - The Democratic Republic of the Congo is in the midst of a complex war, involving both internal and external actors. The north-eastern provinces of Ituri and North Kivu are perhaps the bloodiest corner of the conflict due to the added dimension of inter-ethnic violence. Whilst a full range of weaponry has been employed in the war, the majority of the day-to-day fighting is conducted in skirmishes using weapons falling into the category of small arms and light weapons. These weapons are also most often used by armed groups in their attacks on, and intimidation of, civilians, though many serious injuries are also inflicted by machetes.
  - In Mindanao, the southern-most island of the Philippines, a strong gun-culture forms the background for a number of conflicts, including a war in Central Mindanao waged between Muslim separatists, the Mindanao Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and Philippines government forces. Since the MILF's main bases were demolished by the Philippines army in the early months of 2000, the war has entered a new phase as the rebels adopted guerilla tactics, causing high collateral damage to civilian targets. In January 2001, the new government of Gloria Arroyo announced it would return to the negotiating table but the implications of this for the conflict are not yet clear. The weapons most used by all sides to this conflict are assault rifles, particularly the M16.
  - The Ugandan research focused on two northern districts: Kitgum and Kotido. The people of Kitgum are exposed to frequent assaults by the Lord's Resistance Army, an armed movement that operates across the border from Sudan. Kitgum and Kotido are also under attack from another direction. The acquisition of small arms has intensified rivalry between the different pastoral groups within Karamoja. These conflicts have affected communities throughout Karamoja (such as Kotido) and spilled over into neighboring districts in Kitgum. During the pastoralists' seasonal migration in search of water and pasture, there are numerous incidents of cattle rustling, abduction and indiscriminate killings.
  
5. Whilst the causes of each conflict vary according to the specific history of the country, they share some common characteristics. The most important is that the proliferation of small arms in the conflict zone acts as a **multiplier of violence**. The Jie and Dodoth cattle-herders in Karamoja, for example, have always followed a traditional nomadic pattern of migration which brought them into conflict with more settled communities. Within two generations, however, the nature, frequency and consequences of raiding has changed dramatically. Lorocho, an elder from Moroto, explained: *'When I was initiated, we were fighting with the Bokora and Jie. Fighting then was fair. You would fight for one month with spears, then you would not fight again for one or two years. Now it is constant and many die.'*

6. In all three locations, another consequence of the presence of small arms is a high level of criminal violence involving firearms. In addition to the attacks carried out for a military objective, the populations suffer numerous incidents of murder, rape, abduction and robbery at the hands of undisciplined rebel and government forces or by gangs taking advantage of the breakdown in law and order. In Kitgum district, for example, a woman was raped by eight armed Jie pastoralists, and another raped the whole night before she was abandoned by her attackers. Elders from Patongo mourned: *'Rape is deliberate. What they do is an act of total humiliation to people. We do not understand their motives.'* Women, whilst rarely the bearers of small arms, very often bear the brunt of armed violence. In some cases, such as in LRA incursions in Kitgum, attacks against the population are a calculated military tactic to extort support from people or to force their silence. At gunpoint, abducted children have been coerced into killing. **Otim Francisco Ray (17)**, an escapee, stated: *'We were forced to kill using axes to save our lives.'*

### **Direct effects of the gun - deaths and injuries**

7. What is the human cost of small arms in terms of deaths and injuries? Estimates for civilian injuries vary widely in literature on the subject. One so far unsubstantiated statistic that is widely used is the estimate that 80 per cent of casualties of conflict are civilians, of whom 90 per cent are killed by small arms fire. The ICRC estimate, based on two studies - one of the ICRC surgical database and the other of data gathered in Croatia, put the figure for civilian deaths in the region of 35 per cent (database) and 64 per cent (Croatia).<sup>1</sup> The gathering of accurate statistics in conflict zones is clearly very difficult and in some cases impossible.
- In Kitgum and Kotido, civilian communities are the primary target of the LRA and cattle rustlers and as a result the majority of victims are civilians. Between 1998 and 2000, even in a hospital (Kitgum Government Hospital) used as a referral center by the military, civilians constituted 53 per cent of the conflict deaths. Most conflict deaths are caused by small arms: amongst the civilians who reached four hospitals in the region, 63 per cent died from gunshot wounds as opposed to 37 per cent who died from bomb or mine injuries. Over the same sample period, the figures for civilian injuries are even more striking with over 90 per cent reporting with gunshot wounds compared to 9 per cent reporting with bomb and mine related injuries. This wide disparity is explained by the fact that bombs and mines only feature in the conflict with the LRA. In Kotido, small arms alone fuel the violence.
  - What proportion of conflict deaths in Central Mindanao are civilian is hard to ascertain as not all deaths are recorded, particularly amongst the Muslim communities as they have a tradition of immediate burial. Attempts by the authorities to ensure registration of deaths by offering a reward has also encouraged false registrations. The picture is further complicated as the distinction between combatants and civilians is often blurred by the

<sup>1</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (1999) *Arms Availability and the Situation of Civilians in*

practice of arming civilian militias. However, the guerilla tactics adopted by the MILF since the middle of 2000 were widely perceived by the local population to be exacting much higher civilian casualties than before. In an attack on two buses in November, for example, the majority of casualties were local residents: five were killed and two villagers and 14 bus passengers injured. As for the proportion injured by small arms, one well-documented sample based on 190 conflict-related deaths in 2000 found that 86 per cent of civilians were victims of small arms.

- Reliable data was impossible to obtain in Ituri and North Kivu as basic information, such as total population figures, are not available. However, the nature of the inter-ethnic violence in the region has resulted in the vast majority of casualties being civilian rather than military as whole populations have been targeted. It is feared that some 50,000 from both Hema and Lendu communities have lost their lives in this conflict since 1999, though this cannot be verified.
8. Aside from the trauma of bereavement, our researchers found evidence that loss of family members has a profound impact on the welfare of families. The death of an economically active family member, particularly a father, makes the remaining family more susceptible to poverty. Similarly, caring for those injured physically or psychologically, prevents those assigned caring responsibilities from undertaking income generating activities.

### **Indirect effects produced by fear of the gun**

9. Figures for deaths and injuries tell only a fraction of the story of the damage done by small arms. The fear of the gun also leads to massive social disruption. The indicators picked up by our researchers included displacement, fear of movement to schools and health clinics, loss of assets through armed robbery, lack of long-term planning as a reaction to unpredictable and volatile environments, changed social norms and untold psychological scarring.
10. **Displacement** - in all three case studies, our researchers found mass displacements motivated primarily by fear of armed groups.
- In Central Mindanao in the worst affected areas, the local government records showed that 70 per cent of the population was displaced during the course of the fighting in 2000.
  - In north-eastern Congo, an estimated half a million people are displaced. The patterns of displacement are complex because the presence of so many different factions makes 'safe' a very relative and temporary term. As a result of the renewed fighting around Bunia in January 2000, Oxfam estimates that 20,000 new IDPs are on the move.
  - As a result of the armed conflict between the LRA and the UPDF, a total of 82,645 people in Kitgum district are still in camps and have not returned to their respective homes. In Kotido district, there are temporary displacements during incursions by the LRA and cattle rustlers. at which

times people move to trading centers or settle near military units for protection and return to their villages when the situation normalizes. In the March-April 2000 raid by the Jie, a total of 32,445 people were displaced in Agago County (East Kitgum); while 8,312 were displaced in Labwor County.

### **Sustainable development**

11. The prospect of sustainable development is also a victim of small arms proliferation. Our researchers found that poor development indicators go hand in hand with insecurity and conflict. Mindanao measures poorly when compared to the rest of the Philippines with higher rates of household poverty. Kitgum and Kotido are amongst the least developed areas of Uganda. The formal economy of DRC is dead. Whilst other factors are also at play, conflict proved to be the major barrier to development in all three case studies. The reasons are not hard to identify. Armed violence, for example, has a particularly serious economic impact on rural communities. In all three case study locations, armed groups targeted vulnerable farming communities for supplies, carrying off the farmers' asset base of work animals and food. With their assets depleted, people are less and less able to cope with unplanned events, such as illness.
  
12. Fear of repeat attacks curtails economic activity. **The threat of the gun is comparable in this respect to that of landmines as both result in land-denial: the farming communities are too scared to tend their fields for fear of being a target of random violence.**
  - In Djugu (Ituri), the harvest of the first season in 1999 was abandoned when people fled for their lives and the situation remained too insecure in the second season of 2000 for planting to begin again.
  
  - In Mindanao, the five civilians who were killed in the November attack in Dalengaoen reportedly became a target when one of them opened fire to stop MILF fighters taking his water buffalo. Since then, fields around that community have been abandoned and crops left to rot.
  
  - As a result of LRA insurgency and the activities of armed mobile pastoralists, the production of livestock and food has greatly been reduced. Livestock used in animal traction for food production has greatly been depleted in Kitgum and Labwor. Most people now rely on hand-hoes for crop production. This has significantly reduced the acreage under cultivation. Similarly, the LRA and cattle rustlers constantly interfere with production schedules as people are displaced and confined within limited use of land.
  
13. A picture emerges from the case studies of groups wielding small arms stripping away all the basic requirements for a sustainable way of life. Homes, land, livestock are all being demanded from civilians at gunpoint. It is not just the immediate economic well-being of a community that is at stake. Long-term prospects are affected as both healthcare and education are under attack.

14. **Health care** - When the part small arms play in denying civilians access to medical services is recognized, it is clear that **deaths caused by small arms go far beyond the casualties claimed by bullets**. Denial of access to health services due to the activities of armed groups results in the loss of thousands of lives from diseases that in normal circumstances can relatively successfully be controlled, such as malaria, diarrhoea and respiratory infections.
- In northern Uganda, the insecure environment created by the various armed groups has made it difficult to access health services. Persistent insecurity has disrupted surveillance and monitoring of diseases, as well as organization and delivery of health care. Vaccination programs have been interrupted by the presence of armed groups, leading to the prevalence of measles (a major killer) in the communities. **Martin Oboke**, the Clinical Officer in charge of Patongo Health Centre, lamented the state of vaccination programs in Kitgum district: *'I am not satisfied with the immunization programs at all. The program is not effective, because of the insurgency. Outreach posts have closed.'*
  - In the Philippines, there are **nine times more people per health worker in Central Mindanao** (Region 12) than the national mean, and four times more per physician. Such poor figures reflect the difficulty of attracting and deploying health workers to serve in an insecure environment. Of 439,000 people evacuated in August 2000, 300 (mostly children) died of preventable diseases in the unhealthy conditions of displacement camps.
  - The situation is seen in its most extreme in north-east DRC. Fragile health services, run down over the past ten years and starved by the war of the last two years, are now at breaking point. 8 out of 18 health districts in Ituri have no doctor, either for their hospitals or for their district management. Aru district, with a population of 298,628 has **no doctor** working in the hospital or for the health district. Most health districts have no vehicles, no fridges and no electricity as what little equipment they once had has been looted by armed groups.
15. **Education** - Another threat to the future of arms affected communities is the impact on education. Children have their education constantly disrupted by attacks and, in the case of northern Uganda and north-east DRC, find that even the innocent act of attending school makes them a target for enforced enlistment and abduction by armed groups. Thousands of children have been left psychologically scarred by their experiences. Many have not returned and are spending the years in which they should be sitting in a classroom, learning how to kill with small arms.
- In Mindanao, according to a report from the Cotabato Division of the Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS), all school classes in Carmen, Pikit, and West Midsayap were intermittently suspended (one week at a time) during the 2000 school year due to armed hostilities. Apart from the sporadic clashes, classes were also suspended by physical damage to schools and some displaced children were unable to find places in new schools.

- Education in Kitgum rural areas has been interrupted due to insecurity caused by the widespread proliferation of small arms. The relocation of the rural population into permanent camps has seen the closure of many rural schools. These schools have been amalgamated within the camps into what has come to be known as ‘displaced schools’, catering for the displaced children and staffed by displaced teachers. Because of overcrowding in these schools, basic facilities are inadequate and inappropriate.
- In DRC, the Ministry of Education’s figures show that 3 out of 10 Congolese children aged 5 to 14 never attended school in the academic year 1999 – 2000. The remaining 7 out of 10 would have attended sporadically. The figures in the occupied east of the country are much worse. In North Kivu, the last available figures were from 1995-1996. Since 1996, two wars and the permanent presence of rebels in the province could have only reduced school attendance figures to a fraction of the previous 32%. Added to the insecurity, poverty and the frequent closure of schools, boys are also afraid of attending school for fear of enforced enlistment into the army or rebel groups.

### **Humanitarian assistance**

16. Small arms pose major difficulties for agencies bringing humanitarian relief to civilian populations living in zones of conflict. Humanitarian agencies go about their work in the face of great danger. They can no longer take it for granted that their impartiality will be respected by armed actors. The recent study by the Small Arms Survey on behalf of the Inter Agency Standing Committee estimated that ‘the current “firearm” homicide rate for UN staff is 17-25 per 100,000 – homicide rates that are analogous to those experienced in the top ten most dangerous countries in the world.’ Oxfam’s own staff works alongside UN colleagues and shares the same challenges in taking relief assistance into some of the most hostile places of the world. Sometimes the risks are too high and vulnerable populations are cut off from relief. In north-eastern DRC, for example, due to a mixture of isolation and insecurity, forest dwellers and other displaced people in the Kivu provinces are effectively beyond the reach of the humanitarian agencies working in the region.
17. The proliferation of arms is also costly for humanitarian actors in the fiscal sense. Governments and aid agencies are forced to invest huge amounts in ensuring the security of humanitarian operations both for their staff and for the people they are assisting. As the risks and costs mount for humanitarian and development programs, more money has to be channeled into security, thus taking it away from other needs.

### **Conclusion**

18. Our case studies have confirmed that the nature of conflict in the three countries concerned has changed over the last few decades: deepening and widening to

involve civilian populations both as victims, and as users of guns. However, Oxfam has also found that it is from within arms-affected communities that the impetus for change can be found. From Albania, to Mali, to Kenya and to Sri Lanka, we are working with communities who want to find alternatives to an armed response to their situation. It is at this level that the hardest challenges lie and that the difference must be felt. This will be the test of the international measures adopted to control the trade in small arms and light weapons.

19. Until all arms manufacturers and suppliers abide by the standards set by international human rights and international humanitarian law and protect civilians from indiscriminate attacks by ensuring that small arms do not fall into the hands of abusers, innocent people will continue to suffer. The UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspect is an occasion when the international community can show that it is serious about fulfilling its responsibilities. The people living in conflict zones are dying for tougher arms controls. We must not fail them.