

# Small Arms and Conflict in West Africa

## Testimony of Lisa Misol, Human Rights Watch Researcher, Before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus

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For over a decade, Human Rights Watch has monitored crisis and conflict in West Africa, documented human rights abuses, and pressed for action to stop the abuses. One aspect of this work has been our effort to research arms flows to trouble-spots, including in violation of United Nations arms embargoes, and call for better controls. Today I would like to draw on the findings of our arms-related research to offer an assessment of the impact of small arms in West Africa and make recommendations for United States policy.

The conflict-ridden West African subregion is a sad showcase of the human rights and humanitarian costs of the uncontrolled proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Quantities of arms have flowed to the region despite the rampant misuse of such weapons by state and non-state actors alike. The widespread availability of small arms to abusive actors, in West Africa as elsewhere, greatly contributes to further atrocities and makes peace harder to achieve.

Today I want to focus on three main concerns: first, how weapons are making their way to such forces, through both international transfers and the recycling of weapons within the subregion; second, how those weapons are misused and contribute to conflict, and; third, the impact of small arms on the pervasive use of militia forces and foreign fighters in the subregion's conflict areas. Each of these areas shows that action to halt small arms proliferation and punish abuses must be a key essential element of wider strategies to help West Africa move toward peace and respect for human rights.

### **Arms inflows: Embargoes flouted, moratorium ignored**

In principle, small arms are not supposed to be flowing into West Africa. Liberia and non-state actors in Sierra Leone are subject to mandatory U.N. arms embargoes, as they have been for years. More broadly, the member countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1998 pledged not to import, export, or manufacture these weapons. But both measures have been routinely flouted, with disastrous consequences for human rights and

regional security. Contributing factors include lax arms export controls in supplier countries, regional allies who provide cover and sometimes financing, and transnational arms traffickers motivated by profit. Another key factor is the ability to pay of embargoed buyers, who use misappropriated funds or trade valuable commodities such as diamonds or timber concessions for arms.

Let me cite an example drawing from Human Rights Watch's research. In mid-2003, while conflict raged in Liberia, the government of Guinea imported mortar rounds and other ammunition from Iran. These were declared on cargo documents as detergent and technical equipment. From Guinea, the weapons cargo was forwarded to allied rebels inside Liberia who had just made two offensives on the capital, Monrovia. The rebels, of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), used those weapons to fire indiscriminately on civilian areas of Monrovia in what was known locally as World War III. Scores of civilians were killed and hundreds wounded when the mortar rounds landed in make-shift camps for displaced people and other populated areas. One of the tragedies of this case was that it was child soldiers children as young as 11 years old who fired many of the mortars.

Throughout 2001, 2002, and into 2003 Charles Taylor's then government also arranged to import arms, including in August of last year. Had he been successful, the fresh arms supplies would no doubt have extended the fighting and associated human suffering. Taylor's arms purchases have been well documented by U.N. panels of experts. They have highlighted the role of illicit arms brokers operating from Europe and elsewhere. Regional governments are also a factor; in one case Human Rights Watch helped bring to light, Taylor relied on cover from Burkina Faso.

Today we are concerned by reports from informed sources in Liberia who told Human Rights Watch that a new insurgency could be emerging in Liberia's Nimba County. Such a development could make the area a magnet for former Taylor supporters including fighters from Sierra Leone and Guinea. Given their record of gross abuse, this would put civilians at great risk.

The human rights cost of arms flows to embargoed Liberia extend beyond that country's borders. Some of Taylor's ill-gotten arms were obtained on behalf of rebels in Sierra Leone during that country's long war. His role in arming and supplying those rebels helps form the basis for the indictment of Taylor before the Sierra Leone Special Court. The Special Court argued that this military support made Taylor complicit in rebel atrocities.

Although Liberian fighters are currently being disarmed by U.N. peacekeeping

forces, there are good grounds for fears that some of their arms and the regional fighters who fought alongside them are in the process of passing back over borders and fueling conflict elsewhere, most notably in Cote d'Ivoire, and thus contributing to continuing abuses against civilians.

The U.N. panel on Liberia is actively monitoring embargo enforcement and is due to report soon on their new findings. U.N. peacekeepers in the region are also contributing, including through improved information sharing between U.N. missions. This is a welcome development that should help deter sanctions-busters.

There is also a need to give teeth to the ECOWAS small arms moratorium so that it, too, will be better enforced. The moratorium, signed in 1998 and renewed in 2001, is due to expire this year. While some governments abide by its principles, others clearly do not, as shown by Guinea's arms import on behalf of LURD. Improved capacity in the ECOWAS secretariat could help, but there is no substitute for political will.

At the moment, we are gravely concerned about reports of arms imports to Cote d'Ivoire, where the peace process is not only deadlocked, but deteriorating. New arms supplies entering the country on either or both sides could produce renewed attacks on civilians of the kind we documented in a report on the 2002-2003 conflict. During that conflict, the government procured weapons from overseas and rebels in the north apparently obtained arms via Burkina Faso, among other sources.

### **Circulation of weapons spreads instability**

Arms exports and imports are not the only concern in volatile areas of West Africa. The circulation of arms within borders also presents major human rights problems in the subregion. In countries where tensions are high, weapons availability risks reigniting or spreading conflict and associated human rights abuses.

Nigeria provides an example of arms availability and misuse. Significant quantities of arms are available, due to active cross-border smuggling. In 2002, the Nigerian Customs Service reported that it had intercepted small arms and ammunition worth more than U.S.\$30 million at border posts in a six-month period. In a single haul in November 2003, it took in a consignment of 170,000 rounds of ammunition. Just this month, the Nigerian government announced that so far in 2004 it had seized some 112,000 illegal firearms.

These weapons are finding their way into the wrong hands. Earlier this month, several hundred people were massacred in an incident of inter-ethnic conflict involving firearms and machetes. The massacre was part of a series of attacks

and counter-attacks in Plateau State. The country also has experienced surges of armed violence by politically-sponsored thugs, especially in connection with elections.

The country's oil-rich Delta State has seen conflict since 2003 involving well armed ethnic militia groups and motivated in part by economic interests in stolen crude oil. These militia groups use a range of sophisticated weapons, including semi- and fully-automatic rifles, alongside more traditional weapons such as fishing spears and cutlasses. Hundreds of people have been killed in the violence in Delta State, which also resulted in the displacement of thousands and the destruction of hundreds of properties.

### **Mercenaries, militias wreak havoc**

Just as weapons are recycled from conflict to conflict in West Africa, so too are some of the fighters. The easy availability of small arms and their circulation within and across borders facilitates the formation of new armed groups and the use of untrained civilian militias, ill disciplined fighters, and unaccountable mercenaries. The allegiance of these individuals is all too easily bought by state and non-state actors alike with the promise of looted goods or a few dollars.

These militias, private armies of thugs, and roving groups of fighters routinely commit abuses against, and often terrorize civilians. The use of such forces has been witnessed in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire. Many of the fighters who are recruited, including former Sierra Leone rebels, are notorious for their human rights violations. They hire out their services in conflict after conflict.

It should come as no surprise that in Cote d'Ivoire's war all sides used fighters from neighboring Liberia and at one point the western part of the country was simply overrun by foreign fighters and civilian militias. Mercenary pilots from former Soviet countries have been used in this and other conflicts in West Africa. Human Rights Watch has documented cases of indiscriminate fire by such pilots from helicopter gunships in Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire. We also have documented the presence of mercenaries carrying Angolan passports in the 2002-2003 conflict in Cote d'Ivoire.

The conflict in Cote d'Ivoire nominally ended in July 2003, but the country is intensely divided. It is effectively split in two with government-held areas in the south and territory controlled by rebels in the north. Civilians continue to suffer at the hands of both sides and their associated militias. Small arms are often the tools of their abuse.

A demonstration in March was the scene of a violent crackdown that lasted days

and, according to a U.N. report, took at least 120 people's lives, many of them from indiscriminate fire by security forces. The Ivorian government admitted that those responsible for the deaths included government-backed militias it termed "parallel forces." Some of these militias have reportedly been armed by the country's security forces.

Foreign journalists have not been spared from the wanton abuse by security forces and brazen impunity of thugs. One was shot at point-blank range by a policeman, and another recently was "disappeared" and is presumed dead. Most recently, government supporters as well as some rebel supporters have threatened to resort to violence, which could easily spiral the country back into full-blown conflict.

### **United States Policy**

The United States can and should take steps to address these troubling trends. As West Africa's war-torn societies confront the proliferation and misuse of small arms, the United States can enhance their efforts in a number of ways. In doing so, it should build on existing efforts and looking to wider impacts on the global small arms problem.

We support many of the constructive ideas offered by others today, including with respect to restraining U.S. arms exports to conflict regions, supporting disarmament measures, and promoting legally binding norms to prevent arms from being supplied to human rights abusers. I would suggest a few specific ideas for how to move forward.

At the regional level, I would emphasize the need to strengthen the ECOWAS small arms moratorium and its implementation. In our view, the moratorium should be expanded to encompass all weapons categories, developed into an information-exchange mechanism, and made binding. Further efforts are needed to ensure that arms exporters comply with the moratorium, which could be facilitated through full participation in the proposed information exchange.

The United States is making an important contribution by supporting security sector reform and rule of law initiatives in Liberia and has been a key supporter of accountability in Sierra Leone, particularly with respect to the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Such programs, and the issue of accountability more broadly, should be a focus of engagements with any number of countries marked by security forces who commit abuses with impunity.

However, a chain is only as good as its weakest link, and today that link is Cote d'Ivoire. I can not stress enough the potential this conflict has to destabilize the

precarious peace in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea. If the situation in Cote d'Ivoire is not brought under control, it could draw in roving combatants from those nearby countries. A return to all-out war in Cote d'Ivoire could threaten many lives and also jeopardize U.S. efforts to help Liberia solidify the precarious peace it is just starting to enjoy. Weapons coming in and out of Cote d'Ivoire need to be closely monitored by all. Once the peace process is back on track and disarmament is underway, the U.S. should also push for the Ivorian government to restructure and train the security forces.

The United States also should support monitoring of arms embargoes and accountability for sanctions-busters, and do so consistently. It should insist on compliance with arms embargoes by private actors and governments, even those allied to the U.S., as was the case with Guinea. The work of U.N. expert panels has been valuable and their recommendations should be taken up, which the United States can help ensure in concert with other members of the U.N. Security Council. One important element relates to the financing of illicit arms purchases. For example, there is need for follow-up on the auditing of revenue in Liberia to ensure that the practices of the Taylor government are not repeated.

On the question of mercenaries, militias, and roving fighters, the U.S., through its presence in the region, could begin to help bring the problem under control by collaborating with relevant bodies to monitor and publicize their activities, especially with respect to how these rogue elements are armed and financed.

The United States also can exercise leadership on the global agenda to address some of the fundamental problems that contribute to human rights catastrophes in West Africa and elsewhere. One key area is the need for global measures to control the activities of arms brokers. Another is developing, adopting, and adhering to minimum global standards for arms exports, so that weapons are not furnished to known abusers. Strict human rights standards also must be upheld when granting military assistance. U.S. legislation circumscribing such assistance on human rights grounds offers a useful model that could be promoted abroad.

## **Conclusion**

The problems of small arms, conflict and human rights abuses in West Africa are interwoven. The spread and misuse of small arms helps fuel conflict, and conflict generates a market for more weapons. These weapons, in the hands of combatants who have a history of indifference for the principle of civilian immunity, lead to egregious violations against innocent people. Mercenaries and arms traffickers make a tidy profit off their trades, and the combatants can often count on outside support to finance their wars. But it is the civilians who ultimately pay the price. And it is for them that we must strive to undo the deadly dynamic that has consumed much of West Africa. I hope today is a step in that

direction.

Thank you.

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**Related Material**

[Weapons Sanctions, Military Supplies, and Human Suffering: Illegal Arms Flow to Liberia and the June-July 2003 Shelling of Monrovia](#)

Background Briefing, November 3, 2003

[The Regional Crisis and Human Rights Abuses in West Africa](#)

Background Briefing, June 20, 2003

[UN: Global Action Needed on Small Arms](#)

Press Release, July 7, 2003