

The Sustainable Development Goals and a Substantial Reduction in Illicit Arms Flows



Swadesh Rana, pictured, top row, 3rd from the left, at the first ever UN Group of Governmental Experts on Small Arms in South Africa, 1996. Ms. Rana served as the Executive Secretary of the Group on behalf of the UN Department for Disarmament Affairs.

A substantial reduction in the illicit financial arms flows is another benchmark in achieving shared goals of global agendas of disarmament and development for dealing with the changing threats to international peace and security. Underdevelopment, maldevelopment and lack of development is a non-military threat to international peace and security in the disarmament agenda for diversion of additional assets from military to non-military investments to narrow the gap between the developed and developing countries. Without a measurable reduction in its global burden, a growing threat of armed violence is a major obstacle for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 as it was for the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

For achieving measurable reductions SDG 16 target 4 is committed to “significantly reduce illicit *financial* arms flows, and strengthen the *recovery and return of stolen assets*”. That wording endorses the disarmament agenda’s bifocal concentration on return and recovery (R&R) of a subcategory of weapons used as primary tools of armed violence and on illicit traffic as the major mode of their unauthorized acquisition. The development agenda’s addition of *stolen assets* to R&R and focus on the *financial* dimension of illicit

arms flows widens the resource base for meeting the target by 2030 with measurable benchmarks.

Customarily, an arrival at a benchmark is preceded by a baseline assessment. For SDG 16 target 4 several benchmarks were reached prior to 2015, both in the return and recovery of more of the weapons in unaccounted circulation and in collecting broader-based information for installing new instruments to monitor illicit arms flows. Including but not confined to those led by the United Nations, bulleted below are some benchmarks reached by 2018:

- United Nations-led installation of multiple instruments to monitor and report official arms transfers.
- United Nations establishment of a coordinating mechanism for system-wide activities on small arms.
- United Nations programme of action to curb illicit arms traffic with situation specific incentive packages for return and recovery of weapons in unaccounted circulation.
- United Nations determination of indicators of trends in supply and demand of illicit arms flows.
- United Nations-made estimates of inventories, sources and modes of procurement for the weapons recovered through disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation of former combatants.
- Private sector's calculations of the direct financial loss to global economy due to illicit arms flows by itself and as linked with illicit trafficking of drugs, precious metals and humans.
- Multinational development institutions' tabulation of the indirect human costs of armed violence through internal displacement and outflow of refugees.
- A more proactive role in violence prevention by the global civil society with an exponential increase in the number of its cross-sectoral participants to protest against the human casualties of armed violence in conflict and non-conflict settings.

Predated by post-conflict operations for Disarmament, Demobilization and Rehabilitation (DDR) of former combatants, the R&R of weapons from conflict and non-conflict settings is an ongoing measure of practical disarmament in pursuit of the United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (POA) since 2001. In addition to those surrendered for DDR and recovered by the POA, more weapons were also returned to or confiscated recently by national law enforcement and crime prevention agencies in response to public protests against increased firearm shootings outside conflict settings. A conservative estimate in post-conflict and conflict settings for the last decade and half is an average R&R of over 50,000 weapons a year. With a rate of each R&R varying between as low as 3 and as high as 57,000 so far the number of weapons available for illicit arms flows would need to be revised downwards as a percentage of the weapons in unaccounted circulation worldwide by nearly 1.4 million in 2030.

The addition of a financial dimension to illicit arms flows in SDG 16 target 4 enables faster detection of origins and choking points already monitored by functioning mechanisms for curbing organized crime, illicit trade and money laundering. To stem the links between human, drug and arms trafficking, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is training law enforcement personnel in investigating such activities within and across some regions. In an operation to combat illegal drugs and weapons for organized crime that was led by the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), 422 arrests were made in 10 days with participants from 35 countries in Central America and the Caribbean. Movement of money and capital from one country to another are under a closer scrutiny for money laundering by bankers and others private investors affected by an annual loss of \$1 trillion

to global economy due to illicit financial transactions of which \$1 billion is calculated as resulting from illicit arms flows.

Compared with a calculated baseline of the value of assets stolen by illicit financial arms flows, estimates of the number of weapons in the supply line for illicit transfers continue to be essentially an exercise of running in place to discover what is intended to remain hidden. Situation specific data, anecdotal information and methodologically impeccable estimates leave room for unpredictable swelling of supply lines for which over 95 per cent of the weapons still originate with authorized manufacturing by over 1000 companies in 100 countries worldwide. To avoid the long-distance transport costs for returning and storage back home, some departing external powers just abandon in situ what they used or armed the local militias and armed forces with. Private manufacturing of crudely assembled weapons and ammunition in backyards goes through upward spikes for self-defense and illicit barter of human, drug and arms traffic in some conflict-prone sub-regions. Countries en route to locations of armed conflicts keep stumbling upon stocks of usable and dysfunctional weapons that they never bought or transported. Coastal countries hiring private security guards during the peak of maritime piracy have yet to get rid of all the weapons left in their storage for use elsewhere in return for concessional rates for protecting their commercial liners. Of the three authorized categories for buyers of all manufactured weapons, registered civilians account for more than the combined total bought by the other two that do not provide public information of what and how many they buy i.e. the armed forces and law enforcement agencies. Among those bought by all three but filling the illicit arms flows are a category of easy to conceal and carry weapons (CCWs) that is popularly known as the real weapons of mass destruction (WMD) for the death and destruction they can inflict. There are enough of these CCWs in unaccounted circulation to fight low-intensity warfare for two decades with sufficient ammunitions and improvised explosives to destroy the world twice over.

Every single country in the world is a partner in the legitimate acquisition of CCWs through domestic manufacturers or authorized arms trade because half of all the countries in the world still rely solely on arms imports while a quarter of those that manufacture domestically also come among the top importers of arms. An early detection of one or more points of diversion would go a long way in following the most frequently relied routes for illicit arms flows of CCWs. The possibility of doing so showed up in the situation room of the Ammunitions and Explosives Unit of the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) through a world map with 50 dots across four of the five continents to chart the transit route of a single illicit flow of arms. Intelligence agencies in Central America routinely find children with no criminal intent but travelling through secluded ravines and crowded markets for carrying harmless parts of different weapons bought by multiple buyers for assembly before being put in the supply line.

Limitations on a baseline data about the number of illicit arms flows notwithstanding, there are greater possibilities of substantial reductions for SDG 16 target 4 in 2018 as compared to 2015. Hitting the target in 2030 would be an occasion for a relay of a global torch lit by bonfires in each of the countries that participate in bringing about those reductions. Induced or voluntary, each bonfire would symbolize a highpoint in benchmark convergence of global agendas for disarmament and development with more proactive participation by the global civil society.

Registering a twentyfold increase in its number and a tripling in the number of countries of origin in a decade, the global civil society occupies the largest ever space now between the family and the state as the basic unit of governance. International financial and developmental institutions are encouraging the global civil society to become its own chartered accountant with the heaviest stakes in preventing armed violence. With armed conflicts changing fast from inter to intrastate, to State vs. non-State actors to societies at war with themselves, up to 90 per cent of the lives lost now to armed violence are those of civilians. A more proactive accountancy role for the global civil society carries with it a responsibility to reduce the engagement of un-civil society in illicit financial arms flows and illegitimate use of CCWs. From lone wolves to martyrs looking for a cause to fight for, uncivil society also includes fence sitters. With protection measures for whistle-blowers and amnesty for wavering offenders, some may be induced to jump fence to escape self-destruction by a 2 per cent increase in suicide rates for users of CCWs to harm, displace and kill the civil society.