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**THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF  
LIGHT WEAPONS AVAILABILITY  
AND PROLIFERATION**

by Christopher Louise

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## ◆ Preface

As part of its activities for the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in March 1995, UNRISD commissioned a number of papers on problems of social integration. As countries confront the seemingly intractable problems of social conflicts, institutional breakdown and mass alienation, the topic of social integration has assumed increasing importance in public debate. This paper, by Christopher Louise, examines the social effects of the proliferation of light weapons on societies around the world. It identifies the factors and circumstances that are fuelling the growing trade and widespread use of small arms and explores the social consequences of the increasing availability of such weapons.

The number of countries experiencing major armed conflicts has escalated sharply in recent years. A distinctive feature of contemporary warfare is the extent to which the parties involved rely on light as opposed to heavy weaponry. The majority of conflicts in the world today are conflicts within states, involving “irregular” as well as “regular” armed forces, and in these types of conflicts major weapons systems are of less significance than light weapons. Yet the international community has remained relatively indifferent to the control of small arms and light weapons, concentrating instead on restraining the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

A particularly disturbing aspect of today’s wars is the extent to which civilians are involved — both as victims and combatants. The reasons for this are varied and complex but, as this paper reveals, the situation has been fuelled by the rapid proliferation of increasingly deadly light weapons and the extreme ease with which people around the world can acquire them. In several developing countries, an AK-47 can be purchased for just a few dollars. In the United States, spare parts shops and mail-order magazines sell the components necessary to convert semi-automatic weapons into military-style fully automatic weapons.

The changed nature of contemporary warfare has contributed to a rethinking of traditional concepts of security. Ever since the collapse of communism, analysts, strategists and academics working in the field of international relations have been engaged in an intense dialogue concerning the shape and nature of the post-Cold War world. Within this dialogue the arms trade and its consequences are crucial for understanding the formation of environments that determine levels of security. More than ever before, the trade and use of light weapons have become associated with rising levels of violence and disintegrative trends, often involving ethnic conflict and crime, which threaten the fabrics of societies worldwide. In areas where violence is pervasive, the proliferation of light weapons and small arms accelerates societal dysfunction, political anarchy and the undermining of state authority.

Christopher Louise is a researcher at International Alert. The production of this paper was co-ordinated by Peter Utting. UNRISD research on conflict-related issues continues under the research programme **The Challenge of Rebuilding War-torn Societies**.

March 1995

Dharam Ghai  
Director

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# PART I: INTRODUCTION

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## ◆ Defining the Problem

The linkages between the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, globalization and social disintegration have been greatly under-researched. The dearth of serious enquiry into these relationships is all the more significant because small arms and light weapons continue to be commonly used in many of the violent civil and ethnic conflicts of the post-Cold War era. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) documented 34 major armed conflicts (with casualties exceeding 1,000 persons) in 1993, all of which were being conducted mainly with light weapons and small arms. A number of these conflicts were also using major weapons systems.<sup>1</sup> While it is obvious that there is a correlation between the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, societal violence and a general weakening of the social fabric, identifying the exact nature of this relationship in any one situation or universally is more problematic. In addition, too little is known about the international trade in these weapons and the true extent of societal militarization around the world.

**Light weapon** has been used as a generic term to describe all conventional munitions that can be carried by an individual combatant or by a light vehicle.<sup>2</sup> This includes small arms (defined below), bazookas, rocket propelled grenades, light anti-tank missiles, light mortars, shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles and hand placed landmines.<sup>3</sup> **Small arms** is a sub-category, consisting of automatic weapons up to 20 mm, including sub-machine guns, rifles, carbines and handguns.<sup>4</sup>

Most light weapons do not require complex training or expertise to operate — making them suitable for insurgents and irregular forces, which lack the formal infrastructure of a professional army. Furthermore, the specification of small arms is important in terms of military and non-military demand and usage of light weaponry. While organized groups, normally described in terms of their military activity, will use the whole range of light weapons, criminal and other non-military requirements have traditionally only involved small arms. But there is an increasing overlap between the two categories as both military and non-military materiel become more available. As this paper attempts to illustrate, the social impacts of light weapons proliferation are increasing and becoming more diverse.

The international community's relative indifference to the control of such weapons has been due, in part, to the concern generated by the continuing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems as well as major conventional weapons systems and technologies. By comparison, the worldwide transfer and sale of light weapons seems to be seen as peripheral to a stable international system. This is illustrated by the United Nations Arms Register, for example, which lists certain types of major

weapons systems under its transparency régime. In as much as weapons control régimes are aimed at mitigating tensions that could lead to conflict, there are a number of inconsistencies inherent in the current system. The international state system is increasingly being dominated by conflicts **within** sovereign territories, involving irregular as well as regular forces. In these types of conflicts, major weapons systems are of less significance than cheaper, more easily available and more numerous light weapons and small arms. Insurgent groups and paramilitary organizations have been able to utilize available light weaponry, much of which is based on technologies dating back to the Second World War, with devastating effect. Civilians have been the principal victims of these weapons.

This paper explores the systemic processes that have facilitated proliferation of light weapons and describes some of the impacts of this proliferation on particular societies. The available empirical and anecdotal evidence gives rise to two sets of observations. First, the proliferation and use of light weapons and small arms in societies around the world can be seen as symptomatic of deeper problems in the fabric of these societies. Therefore, the effects of this proliferation must also be sought in broader political, social and economic contexts. Second, it is apparent that the availability and use of these weapons affect the pace and direction of societal violence. In areas where structural violence is already severe, the proliferation of light weapons and small arms accelerates societal dysfunction, political anarchy and the undermining of state authority. It is also apparent that even where the overall framework of state authority is not challenged, the proliferation of arms exacerbates deep social problems and widens domestic fissures.

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## PART II: GLOBALIZATION AND MILITARIZATION

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### ◆ The Changing Roots of Conflict: Globalization and Localized Violence<sup>5</sup>

The past fifty years have been marked by contradictory social and political trends at the global level. On the one hand, the world has become increasingly unified through globalization and modernization. These processes have promoted a sense of global integration and induced the spread of a universal culture. On the other hand, the state system has experienced the growth of particularism and localized violence, accompanied by the empowerment of groups seeking socio-political fragmentation. Although there is a tenable correlation between these two phenomena, there is no simple relationship of cause and effect that links the multi-faceted nature of globalization and the complex issues associated with the rise of particularism and the spread of localized violence. Nevertheless, the hypothesis of a link must be considered since these contrasting images appear to be two sides of the same geopolitical coin, the currency of which is shaping the dimensions of the post-Cold War world.

This, then, is one of the profound contradictions in the international system: while in the developed world warfare has altered the character of both international and domestic politics — making war a less rational means for states to achieve their political objectives — the developing world continues to be prone to more frequent incidents of conflict. In some countries, Clausewitz's maxim that war should be regarded as "nothing but the continuation of politics by other means" is a stark reality. In many of these areas "government has become the management of conflict, opposition has meant insurgency and guerrilla activities have become a life-style".<sup>6</sup> Unravelling the problem requires analysis of globalization and localized violence, first in isolation, and then in contrast to each other.

"Globalization" is used to describe the process by which the world is being transformed into a single arena. At the heart of this is the contention that the concept of globalization *per se* should be applied to a particular series of developments concerning the "concrete structuration of the world as a whole".<sup>7</sup> The constituent features of this process have developed along a number of historical trajectories: most notably, the universal adoption of the state system; the development of globally interdependent political, economic, and financial institutions; rapid advances in technology, transport and communication; the increasing global demand for commodities and creation of transnational agencies; the development of a fluid global market and the subsequent perforation of state boundaries.

The traditional concept of state integrity, as the central feature of the global polity, is today being questioned more vigorously than ever before: worldwide, the exclusive right to sovereignty and the functional legitimacy of state institutions have been severely challenged by the twin features of globalization and localization. While such supra-national institutions as the United Nations Security Council, the European Community, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have removed elements of absolute sovereignty, many governments also face violent challenges to their authority from within their own borders.

"Localization" can be defined as "the rise of ethnic identities and communalism and nationalism";<sup>8</sup> this discussion of localized violence thus emphasizes the state as the central point of reference. While globalization may erode, in a more abstract fashion and from above, some tenets of state sovereignty, localization and localized violence impinge upon the state from below and perhaps in a more direct fashion. Part of the process of state organization is to maintain the monopoly on the legitimate exercise of violence as a way of structuring internal order. However, it is important to recognize that the rise of particularism/localization is not necessarily a prerequisite for the eruption of localized violence, nor does the development of particularist trends make the emergence of such violence inevitable. In this context, localized violence refers to the use of weapons outside of state control and to the various challenges that this poses to state-orientated precepts of domestic power. The question, then, is how and when do the state's monopoly on the use of violence collapse.

Part of the answer requires acceptance of the assumption that the state is also an idea.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the organizing principle of the state (and its institutions) concerns its legitimacy in the minds of those over whom it rules. The state's monopoly on power may be challenged, for example, because portions of the population within its judicial borders may no longer accept the *status quo*. Alternatively, state institutions may be so weak that the state is no longer able to exercise its authority universally.

It is clear that state sovereignty is being challenged at the popular level in many parts of the world. Why should this be so? In its broader sense, sovereignty represents a two-way street between central authority and citizenry, relating not just to the government's monopoly of power within its territorial boundaries but also to the functional legitimacy of its conduct and its ability to provide for the basic human needs of all the people under its jurisdiction. Basic needs, if defined as security, identity and recognition, are non-negotiable.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, where the state fails to furnish the needs of human security,<sup>11</sup> political security and economic security, and where there exists a vacuum of state authority characterized by the failure of institutional authority to reach all parts of the sovereign territory, together with an absence of the idea of the state, a crisis of sovereignty occurs.

The next question is how has globalization affected this process. Globalization and modernity have influenced localized violence in a rather indirect manner. That is to say, globalization has contributed to creating the framework and conditions in which localized conflict has emerged; increasing levels of violence have been sustained through the proliferation of light weapons.

For example, in recent years the rise of ethnic identity has been emphasized as a crucial tenet in understanding the emergence of so many civil conflicts worldwide. On one level globalization and modernity have been identified as stimulating the formation of ethnicities: it would seem that groups become more sensitive to their uniqueness when they are thrust or incorporated into larger entities. However, several case studies reveal that "ethnic consciousness itself should not be seen as a permanent problem in multi-cultural societies. Rather ethnicities are 'constructed', 'invented', and 'imagined' under particular circumstances and for specific reasons and objectives".<sup>12</sup> Moreover, evidence suggests that many ethnic conflicts have their roots in the history of state formation, in which relationships between dominant and subordinate ethnic groups are structured, and in processes of economic change, in which

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