

AN INTERNATIONAL REGISTER OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS: ISSUES AND MODEL

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing awareness in the world of the problems created by the global surplus of small arms and light weapons.¹ Literature on the subject is replete with statistics outlining the abundance of weaponry and its availability to groups for use in advancing their particular cause, whether that be characterized as political terrorism, state repression, ethnic violence or criminal activity.²

In a discussion of the situation, Michael T. Klare has advanced the "diffusion" model to show the ever-expanding dispersion of armaments to groups at all levels of society and the use of such weapons for what he terms "global violence" versus the previously accepted conceptions of the Cold War "arms race".³ Various other writers have also pointed to huge stockpiles of weapons available for use, and in use currently, in all parts of the globe with attendant destabilizing effects on nation states and high casualty rates among civilian populations.⁴ As has all too often been the case, domestic violence has a tendency to spill over borders and spread throughout a region, drawing in neighbouring states and contributing to international instability.

A number of papers which have been written on the subject postulate various policy measures and programs to bring the situation under control. In a discussion of the light weapon situation, Dyer and Goldring note that transparency, oversight and control are the three essential ingredients for effective limitation of light weapons transfers.⁵ One of the approaches suggested to enhance transparency about the legal manufacture and trade of such weapons is the creation of an arms register for these types of weapons.⁶

Some writers have advocated the extension of the existing United Nations Register of Conventional Arms to include light weapons while others, noting the inability of nations thus far to agree to do so,⁷ suggest the creation of a separate register. Still others have noted that a regional register to address the specific problems of a group of like-minded nations in a particular portion of the globe may be more effective. Such a regional approach has been the basis for the small arms moratorium proposed by Mali as part of a West African regional arms control initiative.⁸

Until now, little has been written or discussed concerning the practical methodology of such a small arms and light weapons register. Most references to such a project make vague allusions to the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms, despite the fact that that initiative