

Local Conflict and Small Arms Proliferation

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by the Human Rights Center and the International Human Rights Law Clinic,
Peace and Conflict Studies, the Center for African Studies
and the Center for Latin American Studies

Carolyn Patty Blum

Director, International Human Rights Law Clinic

Summary

Small arms and light weapons play a pivotal role in local and international conflicts in the post–Cold War era. Yet, there is a dearth of research and data on the inter-relationship between the changing nature of conflict and weapons proliferation. In particular, few scholars are examining links between the proliferation of guns and gun violence in the United States and the proliferation of weapons internationally. This project will begin the process of bridging that gap. It provides a unique opportunity for U.C. Berkeley to take the lead in this important area of research and policy development. Kathi Austin, the leading international experts on this issue, will be a Visiting Scholar at the Human Rights Center in 2000/2001. She will work with the cooperating International and Area Studies units to convene a one-day workshop for faculty and students as well as other researchers, academics and anti-gun advocates to raise awareness regarding the impact of the global weapons trade on local conflicts and levels of violence, to coordinate efforts with domestic and international anti-gun advocates and to help set a research agenda for students and faculty interested on the relevant issues. Ms. Austin also will convene a faculty-student working group, to encourage further research and curriculum development on this topic both in the United States and abroad. Ms. Austin will be in residence on campus on a regular basis during both the fall and spring semesters to direct faculty and student research, prepare for the one day conference and give lectures in relevant classes. Ms. Austin will be housed by the Human Rights Center in the International Human Rights Law Clinic at Boalt Hall Law School.

Issue Background

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War generated world-wide optimism for international peace and security. A shift from superpower proxy conflicts in the Third World to socio-economic development appeared a viable prospect. Actual events in recent years have disastrously failed these expectations. In lieu of increased security, virulent internal conflicts accompanied by unprecedented civilian casualties and gross violations of human rights have emerged at an alarming rate. The local roots and causes of conflict are numerous and diverse. However, in nearly all of the conflicts, the diffusion of small arms, particularly from the industrialized nations to the developing world, has played a decisive role in the escalation, intensification, and resolution of these conflicts.

According to the United Nations and other experts, 46 out of the last 49 conflicts have been fought with small arms and light weapons, and it is estimated that nearly 90% of the casualties were civilians. As recent conflicts in Kosovo, Rwanda and Colombia have shown, the high levels of civilian death and

injury can no longer simply be seen as an inevitable by product of armed conflict. Increasingly, civilians have become immediate targets of armed attacks and violence. In addition, the proliferation of small arms has meant the increasing use of child soldiers as the cannon fodder to carry out these conflicts.

In contrast to the conventional view inherited from the Cold War era, emerging evidence attests to the role of weapons as a stimulus to conflict and a harbinger of massive human rights violations and humanitarian crises. In many cases, the availability of weapons has engendered violent conflict which otherwise may not have occurred, and the exhaustion of ammunition and guns resulted in peace processes. Thanks to advancing globalization and the new private order, the trafficking in light weapons is cheap and robust. The accessibility of small arms has made them a weapon of choice. Illicit arms transfers are not a particular country's problem, nor does the spread of deadly weapons stop at national borders. Guns and small arms are no longer just the preserve of militaries and police forces but have fallen into the hands of ordinary criminals, terrorists, citizen militia and death squads around the world.

Such salient aspects of global weapons proliferation are only beginning to be understood. Regrettably, little research in the field has been done on how the arms networks and pipelines function—from suppliers to the traffickers to the recipients. The transnational nature of the arms market needs to come under closer scrutiny and which can only be done effectively with a cross-regional approach. Given this context, research and analysis of conflict by scholars in area studies, social science and human rights should integrate field data and expertise on the dynamics of small arms proliferation. Cross-regional comparisons of arms proliferation to conflicts in places such as Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe would further enhance understanding of the nature and scope of the problem of proliferation.

In an increasingly inter-dependent world, local incidents of gun-violence resonate across world headlines. American communities which have been victimized by shooting incidents may feel that they share similar experiences with communities elsewhere in conflict zones. Internationally, there is growing societal resistance to "cultures of violence" and calls for the de-weaponization of local communities. Integrated cross-regional and interdisciplinary studies are needed to develop common methods regarding the collection and analysis of data of the implications of small arms proliferation on levels of conflict and violence.

Project Activities

Workshop

A full day workshop will be convened to bring together faculty, students, experts, practitioners, activists, policymakers and diplomats from such fields as law, human rights, social sciences, health sciences, security, international relations and area studies to discuss how the small arms proliferation issue affects their disciplinary perspective. Campus participants will be drawn from the sponsoring units in International and Area Studies as well as, for example, from the Centers for West European Studies, Slavic and Eastern European Studies and the Institute of International Studies.

Some of the broad themes to be discussed include: (1) what are the politics behind the licit and illicit arms trade which is fueling conflict, humanitarian and local community crises; (2) what are the various roles and inter-relationships of government operators, arms producers, traders, brokers, cargo handlers, humanitarian organizations, mercenaries and other private actors; (3) what are the patterns, delivery systems and diffusion of weapons to regions of conflicts and zones of violence; (4) what are the impacts, either wittingly or unwittingly, of arms flows on the humanitarian situation, the level of violence and

livelihoods; (5) how are weapons flows a cause and/or stimulus to violent conflict and war; (6) how can arms control strategies in the field contribute to peace building and conflict prevention; (7) in what ways do domestic and international issues concerning gun control overlap; and (8) how would cross-regional research and studies contribute to a better understanding of the issues.

To give a few examples of how the panels may be diversely constructed: (1) the changing nature of conflict and role of small arms proliferation; (2) the mechanisms through which arms flow through legal and illicit channels from the industrialized world to conflict zones; (3) the measurable impacts of small arms availability on civilian populations including secondary, public health and socio-economic aspects; (4) international initiatives to curb small arms proliferation; (5) domestic gun control issues including firearm laws, municipal lawsuits against the gun industry, responsible business practices, government initiatives to reduce gun violence and educate communities on the dangers of firearms, the activities of citizen groups and victim groups, local community initiatives to promote safety and address youth violence, and the public health approach as violence prevention; (6) how to conduct safe and ethical research on arms networks and small arms proliferation since the issues are often of a highly sensitive nature.

Working Group

A working group will be established to meet regularly and discuss (1) a cross-regional methodology for data collection; (2) how information can be strategically shared between disciplines; (3) research design for case studies and analysis; (4) incorporation of thematic issues into faculty curriculum and student projects; and (5) the possibility of creating an ongoing inter-departmental research project on the implications of small arms proliferation. Students will be eligible for modest travel fellowships to facilitate field work.

Core Participating Faculty

Carolyn Patty Blum
Laurel Fletcher
for Boalt Hall International Human Rights Law Clinic

Eric Stover
Harvey Weinstein
for U.C. Human Rights Center

Harley Shaiken
for Center for Latin American Studies

Michael Nagler
for Peace and Conflict Studies

Martha Saavedra
for Center for African Studies