

Seminar held on 5th March 1999

## **Monitoring the Flow, Availability and Misuse of Light Weapons: A New Tool for the Early Warning of Violent Conflict**

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**Speaker : Edward J. Laurence**

The past several years have seen an explosion of knowledge in two fields which are logically connected but in practice have developed with little synergy: early warning and prevention, and the role of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in conflict. In response to the changing nature of conflict, especially the prevalence of complex and violent humanitarian crises, the issue of early warning and its role in conflict prevention now is center stage. Parallel to this development has been an increased focus on the tools of violence being used in these complex and violent humanitarian crises - small arms and light weapons such as assault rifles, hand grenades and antipersonnel landmines. Academics, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations have established a body of knowledge that increasingly demonstrates that the proliferation, accumulation, availability and misuse of small arms and light weapons are directly linked to the outbreak, escalation, resurgence and lethality of these conflicts.

At the moment there is little interaction between these two bodies of expertise. These two fields need to merge so that early warning scholars and practitioners can begin to integrate weapons-specific early warning indicators into the important work of modeling and preventing violent conflict. In his presentation, Dr. Laurence summarized what is known about the role of weapons proliferation, accumulation, availability and misuse in the con-

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flict process. He then discussed a brief typology of these indicators and their sources, and some specific recommendations on how these indicators can become a more vital part of the early warning process, both in theory and in practice.

## **Relationship between SALW and Conflicts**

The relationship between small arms and light weapons, and the conflicts and humanitarian crises that are currently the focus of the early warning community can be distilled into the following elements:

1. Light weapons, and not major weapons, are the primary tools of violence in the conflicts of the past ten years;
2. The ready availability of such weapons always contributes towards exacerbating and prolonging these conflicts;
3. The magnitude of humanitarian crises stemming from violent conflict is highly correlated with the lethality of small arms and light weapons;
4. Preventing or reducing the possession or use of such weapons is the first step towards creating conditions for human security, the critical precondition for addressing the root causes of violent conflict;
5. SALW also serve as tools of intimidation and repression, targeting civilian populations and facilitating massive displacements;
6. The ICRC and other humanitarian relief organizations have begun to link weapons availability with international humanitarian law violations as a strategy of preventing conflict;
7. The need for prevention is underscored by the fact that dealing with weapons after they have proliferated, been acquired and misused is a very difficult and long-term process.

Integrating weapons-specific early warning into the work of conflict prevention is important, according to Laurence, owing to the ability of appropriate indicators to materially improve the

prevention of conflict by providing unambiguous warning of massive casualties from lethal weapons being exported to or distributed within areas of tension. Early warning work, as part of the larger solution to the problem of human security in general, can complement and motivate the activities of NGOs and international organizations in this area and provide opportunities for collaboration. Progress in this direction is already being achieved, as witnessed in the organization of the NGO community as the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), and the creation of the UN Coordinating Action on Small Arms (CASA) as the focal point for responsibility management among different UN agencies such as OCHA, UNDP, UNICEF, and HCR, among others.

### **Indicators for Early Warning**

The need for appropriate indicators in this context logically poses the question of what information should be gathered in the field. According to Laurance, four aspects of the light weapons problem can be shown to be highly correlated with the outbreak, escalation, resurgence and lethality of violence—namely proliferation, availability, accumulation and misuse. From an observation of these four aspects in the field, important indicators for early warning of violent conflict can be constructed. Laurance subsequently described several operational indicators that, focusing on patterns of SALW supply and use, are illustrative of the link between light weapons and early warning. These operational indicators included the following:

1. Insecure arsenals, police stations, and other weapon storage facilities have been the source of weapons for participants in armed violence. A closer monitoring of these facilities, and especially any weapons theft, could signal the start of an arms buildup designed to destabilize the country.
2. Monitoring borders between countries of warring factions could reveal an increase in weapons flows that would warn

of an impending buildup.

- 3 In many intra-state conflicts a shift from direct fire weapons (e.g. rifles) to indirect and less accurate fire (e.g. mortars) normally results in the direct targeting of social sectors (e.g. , market places) and civilians themselves, indicating that the conflict has escalated to a new (and impersonal) level.
- 4 Government programs that distribute weapons to poorly trained citizens and paramilitary organizations are a good indicator that the potential for uncontrolled violence is increasing.
- 5 Much can be learned about the escalating nature of conflict from focusing on casualties and analyzing the effects of the misuse of light weapons.  
Analysis of weapon-related injuries and deaths can reveal the type of weapon, ammunition, explosive or grenade being used. And the victims can often provide eyewitness accounts of the types of weapons being used.  
Crime reports often contain evidence of the use of a particular type of weapon and can provide clues as to a new phase of conflict and the organizations responsible for the violence.

In order to acquire the appropriate information given such indicators, Laurence underlined the importance of increasing the knowledge base of NGOs. As an example, he mentioned the joint BICC/SAND project to develop a Light Weapons Field Manual that would cover weapons identification, handling and storage, and disposal techniques<sup>1</sup>. An obstacle to encouraging greater involvement by NGOs in the collection of appropriate information, however, is their reluctance to speak of weapons and to provide numbers. This is due, in his view, to the political dimension of such information, and the fact that NGOs capable of acquiring such information in the field are often primarily occupied in the development and humanitarian spheres and are thus already in sensitive positions.

## Monitoring of Light Weapons

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Alternative sources of information, according to Laurance, include military and conflict resolution organizations, people in the field, and other service-providing organizations. With regard to the first, many United Nations peace operations deploy trained military observers in the field who are first-hand witnesses of arms proliferation; unfortunately, however, such individuals rarely have a mandate to gather appropriate information. With regard to the second, individuals in the field can provide important eyewitness information concerning what groups are armed. With regard to the third, NGOs, international organizations, the media and the public health community are also valuable sources of information. Many people, according to Laurance, are skeptical of the utility of early warning; they argue it is ineffective because either appropriate indicators do not exist, or when they did, warnings were not heeded by organizations that could have utilized them to prevent conflict. Human Rights Watch, for instance, had important information that powerful governments were behind the arms trade to the Great Lakes Region, but which was ultimately shelved when they received no response from governments. In Laurance's view, HRW should have used this information to elevate the issue of early warning to the global level.

The case of Human Rights Watch raises the important question of why early warning indicators have not been utilized before. In Laurance's opinion, three main factors explain this neglect. First, the need for weapons-specific indicators has conflicted with the sovereign rights of governments to acquire weapons (especially small arms and light weapons) for their self-defense. This explains why there is little transparency for this class of weapons and the lack of an international regime governing production. Second, non-state actors are also protected by the right to possess weapons for self-determination and liberation from oppression. Third, there is a lack of knowledge concerning the weapons in use. The vast array of types and models of small arms and light weapons have not been covered by the traditional conventional weapons approach; expertise needs to be gathered in this area. Fourth, there is the problem of determining the recipients and authors of early warnings: who will receive such warnings, and

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who will act on them?

## **The Way Forward**

Despite these problems, Laurance believes that the growing literature and experience of early warning reveal several 'ways forward' in this domain. In his view, much of this material is very applicable to making progress in the specific area of integrating weapons-specific indicators into the work of early warning. These include:

1. Creating and using mechanisms within the United Nations system for capturing weapons-specific data. This could include, for instance, tracking weapons flows to a given region over time.
2. Building the capacity of United Nations peace operations to track weapons-related dangers, namely by integrating early warning indicators into mandates.
3. Establishing links between the availability, proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons. The ICRC has taken this up through its 'weapons continuum' approach. According to Laurance, a holistic approach to small arms proliferation in all its dimensions will bring together a diverse range of actors in this field.
4. Raising awareness of how the import and distribution of weapons can exacerbate conflict. Their effects are well known and need to be graphically portrayed as a means of getting the attention of those who can respond.
5. Building links with organizations and individuals in other domains. Small arms proliferation is not simply a security or disarmament question; it also embodies consequences for other domains such as the provision of humanitarian aid, development, short-term relief and refugee assistance.
6. Finally, governments must be confronted when they respond with criticism of weapons-related initiatives. While small arms and light weapons are produced for the self-defense require-

ments of states, they are now being used to kill civilians.

### Questions and Answers

**Q. Could you say something more about the importance of ammunition as early warning indicators? Second, while global initiatives to combat small arms and light weapons are important, could regional initiatives, for instance the West African arms moratorium, be more efficient in controlling arms proliferation?**

A. The issue of ammunition was singled out by the United Nations Panel of Governmental Experts as a way of tackling the problem of small arms. While it is clear that a weapon is useless without ammunition, it is also clear that the high-quality types of ammunition are preferred for both legitimate and illegitimate ends. High-quality ammunition is dependable and produced with high precision machines in industrialized countries. Such ammunition provides a point for action because there are a finite number of such producers in the world, whose governments could be pressured to 'choke off' supply. Ammunition is also usually delivered in bulk, which makes it more detectable and traceable, hence its value as an early warning indicator. There exist many examples where either legal or illegal operations come to halt for need of ammunition.

With regard to the regional versus global initiatives, the former is the appropriate instrument to locate specific mechanisms of arms control, such as border controls. The function of a global instrument is to first establish global norms regarding the transfer, production and accumulation of arms, around which many states, if not most, would subscribe. Second, global instruments must also embody mechanisms that deal with wider consequences of arms proliferation such as victim assistance, capacity building, and disarmament measures, among others. Laurance expressed his apprehension that regional level initiatives will be simply 'global-

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ized', something which in his view is a mistake due to the inapplicability of certain measures at such a level.

**Q. First, with regard to collecting data, the danger to organizations working in the field must be appreciated and taken into account. Second, with regard to the variety of data sources, collecting health data should be a priority. In the speaker's opinion it is the only valid measure of the effects of small arms use and availability, has considerable neutrality and is the source most easily accessible. The ICRC has considerable experience in gathering such data, which, in the long run, can deepen knowledge of some of the dynamics of small arms proliferation. The 'golden rule' is to have research carried out by a dedicated data collector; the challenge here, however, is with donors and the political will of governments.**

**Q. The concept of early warning appears to tackle two sides of a single issue: it is both a means of conflict prevention and a means of raising the political will to limit the trade in small arms and light weapons. How can the prevention side of early warning receive more political attention?**

**A. Indeed, the two sides of early warning go together. While one outcome of using these indicators is to prevent violence, learning about these weapons—in the form of consciousness-raising—is almost a side effect. According to Laurence, if people have a better understanding of the consequences of indiscriminate weapons use, they will be more inclined to report the distribution or presence of such weapons. Consciousness-raising is crucial; one way to accomplish this task is to more formally introduce the concept of weapons-specific indicators into the early warning system which, in his opinion, already exists in the United Nations and other organizations. Weapons-indicators should be simply added to these existing mechanisms.**

**Q. The trade in small arms and light weapons does not take place in isolation, but rather at a nexus with other activities**

such as drug trafficking. Given the implications of this for demand and the excess supply of arms, how can these be approached on a simultaneous basis? While the issue of small arms proliferation has increasingly gained attention over the last decade, only a modest progress has been achieved within the UN (2 resolutions accepted out of 42). How can the international community, including international organizations and NGOs, devise more effective measures?

A. Governments are compelled to address supply and demand simultaneously. A number of examples prove that focusing exclusively on one—for instance supply—is not sufficient; weapons are already circulating. At both the regional and international levels, instruments must incorporate both supply and demand factors. International instruments must provide governments with a mechanism for controlling the trade in arms.

Laurance agreed that the United Nations has not been efficient enough in tackling the question of small arms. The UN still forms part of an 'old world' unable to come to terms with the topicality and urgency of the consequences of small arms proliferation. In his view, by defining the proliferation issue in terms of a disarmament problem under the First Committee of the General Assembly, certain approaches and solutions are excluded. The reason the issue of land mines progressed lies in the fact that it was not first tackled in the First Committee, but rather in the Department of Humanitarian Affairs.

**Q. What kinds of information are some of the humanitarian organizations starting to gather, and how are they doing it? How much willingness underlies these efforts? Are these efforts taking place as pilot projects, and if so, what obstacles are they encountering, and what additional resources do they require?**

A. Gathering information on weapons availability, use and effects forms part of the core functions of public health organizations.

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By definition, however, such information remains confidential in order to guarantee their neutral status. Other NGOs that possess information on small arms—for instance NGOs involved in weapons collection—have begun to increase the scope of their research. The ICRC set a precedent in research in this area through its link of weapons effects to international humanitarian norms.

**Q. ICRC data is in most senses not confidential; the organization is interested in sharing this data and to actively work on credible analyses of weapons injury data. The aim here is to raise awareness in public, and especially among decision-makers and those analyzing arms transfer patterns in militarized parts of the world. It is rare that the ICRC does not disclose data in order to safeguard confidentiality.**

A. The experience of the anti-landmine campaign shows that gathering the data is only half of the work. While much funding went towards numerous databases, such information was not shared and rarely formed the basis for collaborative and cooperative projects and approaches. This ultimately meant that decision-makers were unable to benefit from the insights generated by such data.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See *Tackling Small Arms and Light Weapons: A Practical Guide for Collection and Destruction* (February 2000) Bonn International Center for Conversion and Program on Security and Development, Monterey Institute of International Studies. Available on the BICC website: [www.bicc.de](http://www.bicc.de)