

Small Arms and Human Rights

Small arms contribute to human rights abuses because:

- **Small arms enhance the power of abusive forces to repress individuals and groups**
- **Small arms are used against civilians both in armed conflicts and in countries at peace**
- **Small arms are transferred to abusive actors because of government involvement or negligence in implementing or enforcing arms controls**

Small arms are used to commit a wide variety of human rights abuses, including extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, and torture. Small arms-facilitated human rights abuses committed by governments can be grouped into three categories: commission, omission, or negligence. Commission refers to the use of arms to violate international human rights, including the right to life, and security of person. It also is characterized by direct government involvement in the provision of arms to abusive recipients, including paramilitary or proxy groups. Omission pertains to the absence of regulation over the abusive use of weapons by private actors. It also includes allowing private traffickers to transfer weapons that further a government's political or commercial interest. Negligence encompasses a failure to implement or enforce arms controls, take steps to prevent abuses by armed individuals or groups, prosecute those responsible for abuses, or secure one's borders to prevent illicit gun trafficking.

Small arms have been widely used to kill, maim, rape, and forcibly displace people in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sudan. In Liberia, fresh supplies of small arms to the armed group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), in 2003, allowed the group to initiate an attack in Monrovia in which thousands of civilians were injured.

Small arms have been used to forcibly recruit and arm children to serve as soldiers in dozens of countries around the world. Both government security forces and armed opposition groups have been implicated in the rampant misuse of small arms in conflicts.

Small arms are also used to violate human rights in countries nominally at peace. Some government forces use their weapons in ways that violate the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials. For example, security forces in Uzbekistan and Burma have used excessive force against civilian protesters. Merely possessing a small arm confers power and it does not need to be fired to be misused. For example, soldiers in Thailand reportedly have used rifle butts to beat to death hill tribesmen in custody. While these kinds of abuses are well documented, abusive actors—whether belonging to governments or private groups—have seldom been held accountable for the role they have played in human rights abuses. The same is true of the arms-supplying governments and private traffickers who furnish them with the weapons they misuse.