

AFTERWORD

The Implications of Uncontrolled Arms Trafficking For Peace and Security in Latin America

WE ARE LIVING in an era of rapid and dramatic change that affects all peoples, nations, and regions of the world. Latin America has not eluded these changes. After suffering the disastrous consequences of Cold War competition and, for some, the additional devastation of authoritarian and repressive regimes, many people in Latin America still suffer from an affliction of violence and internal warfare. These ongoing conflicts weaken the state, justify the maintenance of high levels of military expenditure, foster petty and organized crime, hinder the promotion of justice, and interfere with economic development.

Few researchers have spelt out the bitter legacy of the Cold War for the peoples of Latin America as compellingly as Michael Klare and David Andersen in this book. As they demonstrate, the superpowers insinuated their own competition into the region by supplying arms and ammunition to favored regimes and insurgent groups. Exploiting the desire of many in Latin America to overcome the region's poverty and dependency, the powers of the North promised progress and freedom. However, the superpowers did not intervene in the region to alleviate poverty, but rather to advance their respective strategic objectives. The countries of Latin America have yet to shake off the aftereffects of this intervention: militarized societies, persistent violence, and an abundance of weaponry.

It is generally acknowledged by policymakers that transfers of major weapons systems—by fostering an excessive accumulation of military power—can prove a destabilizing element in relations between states. There is an unwillingness, however, to acknowledge that the trade in light weapons—and especially the illegal commerce in such arms—is a major factor in the propagation of criminal violence and internal warfare. As indicated by the authors of this volume, there is a direct relationship between the uncontrolled spread of light weapons and the pervasive violence

that afflicts Latin America. The authors also show how internal conflict and armed banditry in many countries have traumatized civil society and undermined the efforts of governments to protect human rights and combat the increase in violence.

The information collected by the authors makes it clear that transfers of light weapons to Latin America remain rampant. This commerce is good business for the countries supplying these arms, while sparing them any pain or disorder from the consequences of such sales. Hence, the governments of these countries have been reluctant to include the issue of controlling this trade in their foreign policy agendas. While they have stressed the need for transparency in the transfer of heavy weapons (as provided for by the Arms Trade Register established by the United Nations in 1991), they have not allowed for the same level of transparency with respect to transfers of light weapons. Thus, the governments of exporting countries evade any responsibility for the proliferation of such munitions. Nevertheless, when the unlimited spread of light weaponry jeopardizes regional stability and the ability of ordinary citizens to live in peace, this phenomenon begins to be seen as a serious problem. Moreover, when the daily news makes clear that the traffic in small arms and explosives is aiding terrorists, mercenaries, criminals, and drug traffickers—some of whom possess weapons superior to those in the hands of the national army—it is no longer possible to feign ignorance about the threat such trafficking poses to people's lives and regional stability.

In discussing the proliferation of light weapons in Latin America, the authors underscore that it is not enough to consider arms transfers in the traditional sense (that is, sales by one state to another); instead, one must speak of the “diffusion of arms,” entailing the spread of weapons to all levels of Latin American society. With an abundance of small arms, land mines, ammunition, and explosives available on the international market or from black-market dealers, criminals and assassins dressed up as guerrillas can easily acquire (with funds accumulated through extortion, kidnapping, and drug trafficking) the military hardware needed to carry out their crimes and executions.

The contradiction between the massive human tragedies caused by the proliferation of light weapons and the trivial process of acquiring them is striking. The traditional borderline between conventional and irregular wars have lost all relevance for arms dealers. In addition, the commercial distinctions between light and heavy weapons, and between private and

governmental suppliers, have also lost significance. Equally, and without discrimination, the world arms market now serves the needs of governments and rebel forces, legal and illegal organizations, groups and individuals.

In some countries of Latin America, where maintenance of the established constitutional order has become increasingly difficult, the governments involved—even those of countries that historically have demonstrated their commitment to the rule of law—argue that, in the present circumstances, a reduction in the number of weapons held by the national armed forces would not contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability. As long as the commerce in light weapons continues unchecked, and the illegal traffic in such munitions spreads unabated, the state can only with great difficulty exercise its constitutional monopoly on the legitimate use of force or endorse measures for a reduction in arms. Furthermore, the illegal trade in weapons—with all of its deleterious effects on social peace and stability—impose on governments a need for additional arms of their own. A vicious circle is thus formed, wherein resources that could otherwise be used to alleviate the conditions of poverty are directed to the military sector—thereby contributing to further political instability.

While it is true, as the authors point out, that some Latin American countries have themselves become producers of small arms and light weapons, those that do so tend to view these arms as essential for their national defense. If the threat of external conflict is not an issue of urgent priority for the countries of the region—which explains the recent decline in imports of heavy weaponry—the acquisition of light weapons is often considered necessary to confront internal conflicts that threaten to destabilize the constitutional order through violent means. On this issue it is also important to note that many of these countries view the development of national arms industries as an important factor in reducing the acquisition of imported weapons and in strengthening state control over the trade in munitions. Therefore, a distinction should be made between efforts intended to promote peace in Latin America through curbs on the indiscriminate trade in light weapons and national efforts to produce light weapons in order to reduce the importation of such products.

The commerce in arms that is driven by the economic dependence that many industrialized states have on their military industries is a very different matter. For the major arms-producing nations, this dependency entails a need to export weapons, particularly when internal demand has contracted. The multiple economic and commercial interests involved in the arms trade

are precisely those that have fought a worldwide ban on the production and use of antipersonnel land mines. The manufacturers and distributors of mines will continue to make a profit from the sale of such munitions at the expense of mutilated children and the death of innocent human beings.

Obstacles to the Control of Light Weapons

With some notable exceptions, the majority of the more than 100 wars that have occurred since World War II have been fought with relatively simple light weapons. This notwithstanding, many years passed before the international community, as represented by the U.N. General Assembly, adopted Resolution 50/70B concerning small arms and light weapons in December 1995. This resolution will allow the Secretary-General, assisted by a panel of governmental experts, to study issues related to the proliferation of light weapons with the objective of raising international awareness on the subject and examining possible solutions.

There is very little reliable information on the volume of light weapons sales in Latin America, whether through legal or illegal channels. Based on what little information is available, Michael Klare and David Andersen have estimated the regional trade in these weapons at about \$1 billion over a five-year period (1989-1994). Although this amount may not look very impressive when compared to sales of heavy weapons in other regions, it represents a very disturbing factor when the impact of uncontrolled arms trafficking on the current political and social circumstances in Latin America is taken into account.

The authors state that in a context such as Latin America—where internal conflict and not external warfare is the norm—the uncontrolled trade in light weapons can prove more deadly than the trade in tanks and ballistic missiles. The impact of arms proliferation on peace and security does not depend so much on the weapons' characteristics as on their repercussions in the affected countries. Therefore, the spread of light weapons in the region should not be treated as a natural phenomenon, incited by the "love of weapons" that Latin Americans are said to possess, nor should the illegal trade in such munitions be seen as just a collection of criminal actions carried out by greedy merchants. Rather, this phenomenon involves many kinds of players and constitutes a serious threat to peace and stability that must be addressed both by regional organizations and by the larger international community.

However, pragmatism is needed in attempting to control the international trade in light weapons. First and foremost, the factors that are driving people to take up arms against government power must be considered and addressed. Second, it is unrealistic to assume that the countries that manufacture arms are going to shut down their factories or convert them for peaceful uses, or that arms merchants are voluntarily going to close their markets. Finally, it is unlikely that criminal organizations are going to cease their violent activities. While insisting that Latin American governments adopt stricter national controls over arms trafficking and cooperate more effectively among themselves (and with other regions) in suppressing the illegal arms trade, the authors are well aware of the difficulties that these tasks will entail and the obstacles that must be overcome.

The demand for light weapons in many Latin American countries is intimately tied to threats originating in internal conflicts and to the atmosphere of insecurity engendered by criminal violence. Given that automatic and semi-automatic weapons and other light munitions can be acquired by a wide range of insurgents and criminals, as well as by ordinary citizens who feel vulnerable in the face of rising crime, the unrestrained circulation of and illegal traffic in these weapons—often stimulated by the state's inability to provide a just solution to long-standing socioeconomic problems and to curb rampant criminal violence—fuels domestic conflict and increases the sense of insecurity.

In addition, the countries that manufacture and sell weapons—particularly those that have been forced to reduce their defense budgets—promote export sales in order to keep their production lines going, to facilitate in the development of new weapons systems, to maintain high levels of employment in the defense sector, and to secure hard currency. The revenue from government-to-government sales of arms only marginally compensates for the costs of production, since many importing countries have also reduced their military budgets and/or are now competing as exporters in the international arms market. Thus, arms salesmen search painstakingly for new commercial opportunities in the external market, and the satisfaction of any demand—whether from governments, from non-governmental clients, or from unscrupulous black-market suppliers—is viewed as a legitimate way to employ the excess capacity of the munitions industry.

Toward a Framework for Control

Identifying these obstacles makes it easier to understand why the international community has experienced such difficulty in addressing the problems posed by the uncontrolled spread of small arms and light weapons. Even the simple idea of an arms sales "code of conduct," allowing for greater transparency and the establishment of international controls on the production, stockpiling, and transfer of light weapons, is still taboo for many nations. However, the effort to promote transparency through the United Nations that began in 1988 with the approval of Resolution 43/45I (establishing a study group on the arms trade) and culminated in 1991 with Resolution 46/36 (establishing the U.N. Arms Trade Register) demonstrates that progress is possible in this area.

In May 1996, moreover, the U.N. Disarmament Commission adopted by consensus a document on issues pertaining to international arms transfers, in the context of General Assembly Resolution 46/36H of 1991, that articulates the principles and methods that will curb and eventually eradicate the illicit traffic in armaments.

In this document, member governments enunciated the basic principle that the transfer of arms should not interfere with the internal affairs of other states. Recognizing the negative consequences that uncontrolled and illegal arms trafficking have for peace, regional and international security, and for the stability of many nations, the states committed themselves to practice moderation in the production, acquisition, and transfer of weapons, and also to give priority to the eradication of the illicit arms trade. In addition, member states took upon themselves an obligation to establish an adequate set of laws, regulations, and administrative procedures to enable them to effectively control the production and distribution of arms within their territory and, if necessary, to adopt new measures aimed at suppressing the illegal commerce in munitions.

Within Latin America, the Inter-American Commission for the Control of Drug Abuse of the Organization of American States has undertaken the development of a model for controlling the drug-related trade in arms and explosives. This initiative will be supported by surveys made by member states on various aspects of the problem and by a comparative study of the laws and regulations governing arms sales and possession now in force throughout the region.

There is, therefore, no room for pessimism here—at least, it was never felt by this writer—about the prospects for eliminating this scourge. Latin America has, in its favor, vast moral reserves rooted in its cultural and

historic heritage and in the desire of its people to improve their quality of life in a tradition of dignity and independence.

Michael Klare and David Andersen turn their academic rigor, investigative ardor, and moral commitment to the Latin American arena in order to clarify the dimensions of violence and the relationship of light weapons trafficking to the conflicts in the region. Their valuable contribution will greatly assist those in the region who are analyzing these problems—those men and women who have in their hands the management of matters of collective interest, and those individual citizens concerned with the welfare of their people.

—*Graciela Uribe de Lozano*
Bogotá, Colombia
June 1996