

Proliferation of small arms and light weapons: a threat to national security and development

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Abstract: *Recently, the underlying dynamics of war has evolved due to emergence of small arms and light weapons. Its proliferation has become an immediate security challenge to the nation, and an enormous hurdle to sustainable security and development. The study qualitatively examines proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW), and its threat to national security and development. It highlighted effects of SALW proliferation in the country such as tools of death and destruction, human rights and humanitarian law abuse, impeding development and promotion of culture of violence. The study concluded by recommending establishment of international norms, institutionalization of good governance and increase state accountability among others as possible means of mitigating the effects of proliferation of SALW in Nigeria.*

Key Words: *Small Arms and Light Weapons, National Security, Development.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Nigeria has been characterized by a wave of violent that have produced unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe and suffering. The factor of proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) is connected to the horrific scale of violence that engulfed the country for the past twenty-two years. The illicit proliferation of SALW has become a threat to national security. It has killed by far more people than any types of weapons of mass destruction (Omitola and Awotayo, 2016).

Any peace efforts remain tenuous and highly dependent on what happens to the tens of thousands of weapons now in the country. In a more horrific circle of violence that engulfed Nigeria, the roles of SALW availability was conspicuously evident (Ngang 2007). Although most of the SALW are produced in the developed countries, but the major impact is felt in the developing countries.

The Nairobi Declaration designed to combat the proliferation of illicit SALW in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa concluded that “the easy availability of the weapons escalates conflicts and undermines political stability and has devastating impacts on human and state security”(Nairobi, 2000). The role played by small arms in the National conflict has remained unexplored, yet important. An investigation into this may help to prevent the direct and indirect effects of small arms availability and misuse in Nigeria.

1.1 Statement of Problems

Small arms and light weapons are responsible for the majority of conflict-related death. The escalation caused by SALW in contemporary conflicts has led to devastating economy, ruined health, destruction of infrastructures and increase in famine. SALW proliferation has been particularly devastating in Nigeria, where arms have killed and displaced many civilians especially in regions that have witnessed violent conflict. The state that was relatively peaceful before has suddenly turned to the den of highway robbers, gangsters and terrorists. The estimated amount of SALW that are circulating play a central role in fostering instability in Nigeria. The demand for it has diverted the attention of government from development to security in which billions of naira has been diverted.

1.2. Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria with a view to understanding the security implications it has on the development of the country.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Small arms and light weapons has become an international discourse because of its linkage to violent conflict. Defining it is more than an issue of semantics; it often determine by the scope or applicability of particular legislation. United Nations Panel of Experts on Small Arms described small arms to include revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns while light weapons include heavy machine guns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles, portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems, and mortars of calibre less than 100 mm (United Nations, 1997).

Ammunition and explosives includes cartridges (rounds) for small arms, shells and missiles for light weapons, mobile containers with missiles or shells for single-action anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems, anti-personnel and anti-tank hand grenades, landmines and explosives (United Nations, 1997). However, the definition have yet to be universally accepted. Small arms are portable weapons made or modified to military specifications for use as lethal instruments of war (Wezeman, 2003). They are broadly categorized as those weapons intended for use by individual member of security forces. Light weapons on the other hand are broadly categorized as those weapons intended for use by several members of security forces serving as a crew (Ngang, 2007). In essence, SALW embody a huge spectrum of different kinds of weapons and are not as 'small' and 'light' as their names suggest.

Security is generally defined as freedom from danger, doubt or anxiety. Mijah (2007) conceived security as freedom from danger or threats to a nation's ability to protect and defend self, and promote her cherished values and legitimate interest as well as enhance the well-being of its people. National security means the same thing with state security. It is define as the protection of social contract between the citizens and government so that each citizen lives in dignity and freedom (Gilbson) cited in Akinade (2011). Development is the accelerated economic, administrative, social, political, cultural and industrial changes under a situation where progress of civilization can be achieved (Akinade (2018). Development can also mean quantitative growth, qualitative improvement and expansion in the capabilities, capacities, and choices of states. Development is highly correlated to the quality of governance.

Characteristics of Small Arms and Light weapons

The following are distinguishing features of SALW that make them so suitable to contemporary conflicts:

Low Cost and Wide Availability: The production of small arms and light weapons requires little knowledge of technology, and are manufactured for military, police and civilian use. There are numerous suppliers around the world. In addition, the existence of millions of such weapons, given away by downsizing militaries or recycled from conflict to conflict leads to bargain power of the buyer.

Increasing lethality: The increasing availability of rapid-fire military assault rifles, automatic pistols and submachine guns and their distribution to non-state actors have given such actor a firepower that often exceeds that of police or military forces. The adoption of newly available technology into shoulder-fired rockets, mortars and light antitank weapons has magnified the presence of warring factions in conflicts.

Simplicity and Durability: Small arms are easy to use and maintain, it require little logistical support and remain operational for many years. Such weapons require little training to use effectively, which greatly increases their use in conflicts involving untrained combatants.

Portability and Concealability: The flow of small arms is extremely difficult to track or monitor. It is so easy to move from one location to another. They are easily smuggled to areas of conflict and can be effectively cached in legitimate cargo, often in the harshest of climates.

Military, Police and Civilian Uses: Unlike major conventional weapons, which are most often procured solely by national military forces, SALW is not restricted to military and police forces, it is widely used by the civilian population.

3. METHODOLOGY:

The work adopts historical method, therefore descriptive and analytical. It utilized primary and secondary materials as its sources. It entails a chronological and thematic presentation in line with the historical method. However, the reality is that the theme of proliferation of SALW affects different aspects of social relations and has been examined in diverse disciplines. This is a reflection of the complex nature of human interactions. This study therefore draws insights from the approaches of related disciplines that have explored the subject of proliferation of SALW.

4. DISCUSSION :

Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation in Nigeria

Nigeria remains fragile state with a number of rebels in possession of deadly weapons. The proliferation of arms in Nigeria is assisted by surplus supplies from current and past conflict zones, corrupt law enforcement, and growing domestic artisan from various part of Nigeria, which passes down established trade routes. The spread of light weapons by organized criminal groups is nowhere better illustrated than in Nigeria.

Small arms are no longer the preserves of militaries and police force but have fallen into the hands of criminals and death squads around the country. Globalization has contributed to accelerated development of productive forces, scientific and technological progress and ever more intensive communication among states and people. Sadly, it has also facilitated the easy transportation of illegal arms from one country to another, and this has led to national security threat.

Evidence indicates that illegal arms transfers are easier in periods of political transition that are normally preceded by periods of violence (Ginifer and Ismail, 2005). Nigeria's fourth Republic has witnessed the upsurge of SALW. Years of suppressed anger by prolonged periods of military misrule found itself as Nigeria joined the democratic wave. The following are channels by which SALW are sold, transferred or exchanged:

Legal Channels: Currently, there are over 300 manufacturers of light weapons and related equipment in fifty countries around the world, this shows a twenty-five percent increase in the last decade (Salihu and Ozden, 2020). Until the end of World War II, the major producers of these weapons were the industrialized nations. In recent years, China, Israel, South Africa and many developing countries have joined the major producers. Millions of surplus arms that have also been sold or given away by the world's major military powers in attempt to reduce their forces following the end of the Cold War.

Covert and 'Gray-Market' Channels: SALW are also disseminated through covert and "gray-market", most often by government intelligence agencies or private companies linked to such agencies. It is widely believed that military commanders and managers of military factories in Russia and some of the other newly independent states of the former Soviet Union have engaged in large-scale covert sales of weapons to clients in neighboring states and beyond (Salihu and Ozden, 2020). Nigeria government and some groups in the country have been accused of smuggling arms into the country to advance particular objectives.

Illicit and Black-Market Channels: Another category of light weapons transfer is the supply of arms in defiance of international embargoes, and the theft of arms from government stocks or private citizens. In recent years, there has been a striking growth in the operations of black-market dealers to satisfy the needs of non-state actors in ethnic and internal conflicts. Moreover, there are strong linkages between the illegal narcotics trade and black market arms trafficking. Theft of weapons from military and police warehouses is also a major problem in Nigeria (Bahati 2009).

Factors that Reinforces the Proliferation of SALW in Nigeria

Nigeria society no doubt has become militarized by the uncontrolled availability of SALW. Accumulations is determined by the resources at the disposal of the recipient actors. This would not be appreciated without explaining some of the factors reinforce its proliferation in Nigeria.

Quality Factors :

These are factors pertaining to the qualities of SALW that make them attractive for use in areas experiencing armed conflict in Nigeria.

- **Simplicity and Durability:** Due to their relative simple nature, SALW are quite easy to use even by the civilian with little or no military training. In addition, they require little maintenance and logistical support to remain operational for very long periods of time.
- **Low Cost and Wide Availability:** Due to the fact that the production of SALW does not necessarily involve hi-tech capacity and also because they are produced for military, police and civilian usage, there emerge numerous producers and suppliers across the country. This makes them cheap to procure especially as most of them are being recycled from conflict to conflict. This further enhanced by the 12 African countries that have joined the rank of producers (Bourne, 2007).
- **Portability and Concealability:** SALW can be easily moved from one place to another, and can thus be smuggled without much stress. SALW shipments are sometimes disguised as humanitarian supplies, and are only discovered at the failure of the trafficker to bribe the police and customs officers (Boutwell and Klare, 1999).
- **Lethality:** Though many SALW are quite simplistic in nature, their lethality has increased making it possible for a single combatant to constitute a big threat to an entire society. Contemporarily, assault rifles and other automatic weapons can fire up to several hundred rounds a minute.
- **Military, Police and Civilian Usage:** SALW unlike heavy conventional weapons are designed to suit police or military forces as well as civilian use. Depending on the rigor of firearms laws and control mechanisms in any given country, citizens can be in possession of it ranging from hunting guns, simple pistols and shotguns to fully automatic weapons.

Structural Factors :

There are factors or problems that exist as a result of failure of state.

- **Political/Electoral Violence:** Democracy in Nigeria today is facing a stiff test of its time. Elections are considered to be very important in every democratic state with extension to the distribution of socio-economic resources. This explains the increasingly militarized nature of politics in Nigeria. Great value is attached to the utility of violence in politics, with electoral success often indexed to the capacity to unleash violence (Ginifer and Ismail, 2005). The arming of political thugs to win political office has thus led to a larger problem of the proliferation of small arms.
- **Long Military Rule and Low Income of Security Agent:** It is believe in the military circle that power flows through the barrels of gun. The politicization of the military has inadvertently destroyed its reputation as a corrective regime. Corruption has destroyed military professionalism, while customs officers are bribed by weapons dealers, soldiers, police officers and other security forces have been consistently reporting selling government weapons to criminals (Ayissi and Sall, 2005).
- **Unemployment and poverty:** There are many unemployed and underemployed disgruntled able bodied young citizens in Nigeria. Devil, the wise says provide work for feeble hand. They are readily available to be trained and armed to provide for their daily needs. The resultant effect of this is the upsurge of SALW which has been associated with conflicts as a result of it knowledge and easy accessibility in Nigeria.
- **Profitability and its Socio-Economic Utility:** The economic profitability of SALW corroborates its extensive proliferation and culture of violence in Nigeria. The trade in SALW is a symptom but not always the cause of violence. Arguably, the demand for easy profits has encouraged the growth in the arms market in Nigeria. The profits maximization from arms coupled with poor economic situation in the country has made some corrupt citizens engage in this shady business.
- **Politicization of Religious Differences:** Nigeria is a multi-religious entity where religious violence often erupts (The Economist, 2012). It has become very common for the members of the two major religions group to recruit

members as combatant who makes crises spread rapidly for domineering purposes. This has encouraged illegal acquisition of firearms on a large scale either for protection or revenge.

- **Growth of Ethnic Militias:** Nigeria been a multi-ethnic state, conflict is inevitable due to the make-up of the country. This is driven by socio-political and economic domination, which fuel hostilities between or among the various ethnic groups. Adejumin cited in (Hazen and Horner, 2007) described ethnic militias as groups formed to promote and protect the interest of a specific group. They are informally trained and well organized paramilitary groups, well familiar with the use of SALW. Marginalisation has gave birth to ethnic militia in the oil producing Niger Delta region. The emergence of ethnic militia has a synergy with the proliferation of SALW in Nigeria.
- **Growth of Cultism:** Proliferation of small arms in Nigeria has been linked with emergence of cultism in higher institutions of learning which has extended to secondary and primary schools. Pathetically, majority of the students involved in cultism are children of influential people who have incidentally cultivated the culture of gun running. Others who did not belong to wealthy class are sponsored by the patrons who use them for their own ungodly act. Cultism represents a glaring manifestation of the criminal dimensions of SALW proliferation in Nigeria (International Alert, 2011).
- **Porous Border:** Due to the large size of Nigeria, there is the unresolved problem of border security. Nigeria has 4,910 km of borders out-stretched which have to be controlled (Ayissi and Sall, 2005). This wide border creates a serious challenge for Nigeria. Arms traffickers exploit this situation to smuggle SALW into the country.
- **Ineffectiveness of Security Forces:** In Nigeria, citizens feel a strong need to acquire arms in order to protect themselves and their properties from armed violence due to lack of confidence in security forces, which may be due to understaffing or ineffectiveness to carry out their duty. Citizens are therefore left with no choice but to arm themselves.

5. FINDINGS:

Effects of Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons on Security and Development of Nigeria

The influence of small arms and light weapons has changed drastically from means of security to tools of evil and mass destruction. Salient effects of SALW on Nigeria are discussed below.

- **Tools of Death and Destruction:** Unchecked proliferation of SALW has led to untimely death of thousands of people since the emergence of democracy. It has also contributed to psychosocial trauma, which takes much longer than physical wounds to heal, and which may eventually lead to death. The United Nations has termed violence response to social problems as “mental militarization” (Olaniyi, 2012).
- **Impeding Development:** The spread of SALW adversely affects development while encouraging the diversion of resources to security sector, and this has significantly affects the initiation and implementation of development projects. Health and education provision is adversely affected when providers work in a dangerous environment. It has become a serious challenge as inadequate and unequipped health facilities in Nigeria overwhelmed by number of injured people. School programs are interrupted because of threat of arms availability.
- **Undermining Nigeria Fragile and Failed States:** Sadly, the central government of Nigeria is unable to provide security to her citizens. Vulnerable groups are therefore forced to obtain arms for self-defense. Ironically, this often undermine state authority since more weapons can exacerbate violent conflict and make it more difficult for the state to extend its authority.
- **Abuse of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law:** Availability and misuse of small arms in Nigeria has account for many serious human rights abuses. The coercive potential of these weapons, when exploited enable human rights abuses such as torture, rape and intimidation. The proliferation of SALW has also largely responsible for the violation of humanitarian laws, which by extension lead to forced displacement of

populations. Availability of weapons in the hands of undisciplined actors has outpaced efforts to ensure compliance with the basic rules of warfare (ICRC, 1999).

- **Negative Effects on Conflict:** Massive quantities of small arms in circulation have been alleged to be one of primary contributors to epidemic of ethnic, sectarian, and criminal violence (Klare, 1999). The proliferation and easy availability of SALW aggravate the degree of violence during hostilities, as well as encouraging violent rather than peaceful resolutions of differences.
- **Promotion of Culture of Violence:** A culture of violence and impunity may develop with the availability of arms. SALW has contributed to a “culture of violence” characterized by gun dependency and glorification, and this can lead to “Circle of violence” (Laurence, 1998). This circle of violence serves as a threat to democratic political system. It also fosters increase use of state violence and repression and where there are no alternative to this, the people take up arms to restrict such repressive system.
- **Armed Crime:** It is often assumed that there is a relationship between small arms, their misuse, and levels of armed criminality. Small arms availability is linked to a greater incidence of violent death, intimidation and criminality. Accordingly, more firearms is equivalent to more violent crime (Small Arms Survey, 2003).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS:

A number of recommendations are outlined below, based on the findings of this study:

- Nigeria need to adopt international law against the uncontrolled transfer of SALW to the country. The right to acquire arms for self-defense must entail a responsibility to maintain such weapons under effective government control.
- Nigeria must improve in the act of governance by providing basic services for the citizens; as good governance breeds development. Armed struggle will be minimised, thereby controlling the movement of SALW.
- Effective oversight over all firearms found within the territory of Nigeria and strict control over the import and export should be established. This will prevent the diversion of weapons to criminal elements.
- Problem of surplus and absolute weaponry in circulation should be addressed by government by prioritise the destruction of such weapons to avoid them easily get into the black market.
- Existing structures of border control should be enhanced to make it difficult for arms to be transferred illegally from neighbouring country to Nigeria. This can effectively be done by partnering with neighbouring countries and better remuneration of official at the borders.

7. CONCLUSION:

The damages done by availability of SALW cannot be quantified. The producers have grown making it easier and cheaper to purchase. One cannot be in doubt that there are linkages between small arms and security and development of Nigeria. It has become imperative that the issue of SALW proliferation and accumulation be addressed. Consequently, a number of initiatives have been undertaken by government to address the problem. However, many of these measures are just but declarations of ‘political intent’, with little or no political will to implement those measures. Commitment of all stakeholders in Nigeria is highly needed for total eradication of weapon of death.

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