

The Problem of Small Arms in South Asia

by James Arputharaj

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Small arms and light weapons that reach repressive governments and criminals as a result of the international arms trade cause major problems to the people of less developed countries.

In South Asia the main problem arises from the weapons held by gangs and criminals in regions where there may not be any conflict, or at least not a conflict with any political objective. In such cases people are taking advantage of the availability of weapons for private gain or to compensate for the lack of civilian work after conflict or other disruption. The availability of guns tempts people to take up criminal activities.

It is important to note that most of the illegal arms in circulation originated as legal transfers through sales to military units or to legitimate police forces. They then enter the illegal arms trade after they are pilfered or corruptly sold from government stockpiles. Also, some arms held by the police or governments are illicit when used to target civilians or for extra-judicial killing or torture.

It is estimated that more than two-thirds of the small arms in the world are in the hands of civilians with some 75 million illegal arms in circulation in South Asia. Loose licensing practices add many licensed guns to the illicit guns.

With some 600,000 licensed gun holders in Uttar Pradesh and 27,000 in the city of Lucknow, eight gun factories and 2600 arms shops in Pakistan employing some 40,000 people and 200,000 illegal arms in Bangladesh with about 80 criminal syndicates, South Asian security and development are at considerable risk

Small arms freely enter universities in Bangladesh, election polling booths in India, and night clubs and casinos in Sri Lanka. There is a clear nexus between private gun ownership and the crime rate.

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