

Red Flags and Buicks: Global Firearm Stockpiles



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Chinese police prepare to destroy some of the 5,000 guns confiscated in Huaian county, Jiangsu province, on 2 January 2002.

In 2001 there were at least 639 million firearms in the global small arms stockpile. This is at least 16 per cent greater than previously estimated. The most dynamic area of small arms ownership continues to be civilian ownership. Civilian owners have at least 378 million firearms (59 per cent of the global total). This figure represents an increase of 25 per cent over the previous estimate, largely due to better data and counting techniques.

The global small arms stockpile is at least 16 per cent greater than previously estimated, with at least 639 million firearms.

Small arms stockpiles change primarily through the re-circulation of old weapons rather than new production. With the global stockpile growing by roughly one per cent a year through new production, it is the re-transfer of

second-hand firearms that shapes the global distribution most. Where data is lacking, a vital source of insight about changing stockpiles is gun prices. As examined here for the first time, spiking small arms prices are a red flag, warning of situations on the verge of rapid degeneration. Especially where firearms ownership is illegal, prices may be the only way of establishing whether firearms are common or scarce, whether smuggling is effective or embargoes are working.

This chapter focuses primarily on firearms because they are the most numerous category of small arms and those for which data is most available. They also cause the most mayhem and receive the most international attention. Although far less numerous, light weapons like shoulder-fired rocket launchers and mortars require careful consideration as well. Based on unguided rockets, these weapons have enormous military appeal. Conflicts in Vietnam, Somalia, and Chechnya show that such light weapons deserve much greater attention. Already, they have begun to appear not just among insurgencies but also among criminals. The total number of unguided, shoulder-fired rocket launchers is estimated at over 22 million. The total global stockpile of mortars is almost 800,000, not counting improvised versions favoured by many guerrilla groups.

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While the overall trend is for greater small arms stockpiles, several important reductions are highlighted in this chapter. Some of these changes are due to statistical reassessment. For example, Yemen is widely known as the most heavily armed place on earth, reputedly home to 50 million small arms or more. New research and information shows that this figure is a myth. In reality, Yemen has five million to eight million guns. With roughly one for every three people, this is proportionately more than some other well-armed countries like Canada, but far less than in the United States.

FIGURE 2.1 Number of registered civilian firearms in the Czech Republic, 1990-2000

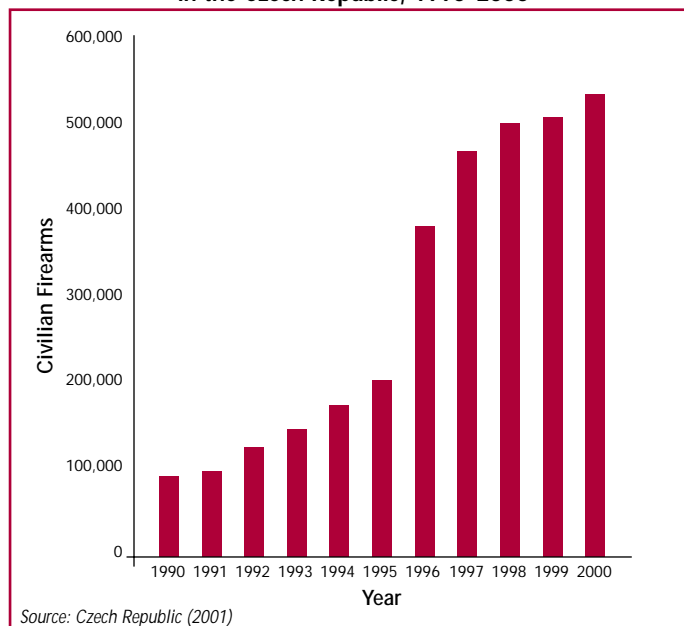


TABLE 2.1 Examples of black-market prices for a single, used AK-47 rifle (various models)

Price (current USD)	Location	Year
10	Afghanistan	2001
12	Angola-Namibia border	1998
15	Mozambique	1999
25	Honduras	1997
40	Phnom Pen, Cambodia	2001
86	Uganda-Sudan border	2001
100	Nicaragua	2001
100	Warri, Nigeria	2001
120	Somalia	2000
250	Sakhkot, Pakistan	2001
400	Siberia, Russia	1998
800	Colombia	2001
1,200	Bangladesh	2000
2,400	Indian Kashmir	2000
3,000	Colombia	2000
3,000	West Bank, Palestinian territories	1999
3,800	Bihar, India	2001

Source: Press reports in the Small Arms Survey database, available on request

Civilian owners have at least 378 million firearms, over 59 per cent of the total global firearms stockpile. Out of nearly 8 million firearms manufactured in 2000, more than 85 per cent went to civilian buyers.

Some stockpiles have been subject to actual reduction. Data released by the US Army shows that its firearms inventories have declined by over 1.1 million or 41 per cent in the last decade. The decline of American military small arms, the result of changes in military strategy, has broad implications elsewhere. Around the world, destruction programmes eliminated a total of at least four million small arms during the last decade. This is equivalent to roughly 0.5 per cent of all the firearms in the global stockpile, or roughly half of one year's new production.

In other regions, small arms stockpiles appear to be much greater than previously assumed. This is especially true of countries where military strategy relied on the strategy of People's War. Consequently, countries like China, Cuba, Libya, North Korea, and Vietnam are likely to have especially large military small arms stockpiles. In some other countries (e.g. Czech Republic) stockpiles appear to be growing due to civilian demand.

Mounting evidence from Chinese police suggests that firearms are rapidly becoming more plentiful. While a low proportion of Chinese people own guns, the huge size of the country's population makes absolute gun numbers high.

TABLE 2.5 Comparing global inventories of major small arms and light weapons

	All firearms	Military firearms	Shoulder-fired rocket launchers	Mortars <90mm
Raw number	638,900,000	241,600,000	22,065,981	781,894
Comparative scale	1,000	377	34	1

Sources: Tables 2.4, 2.8, and 2.21; Fetter (2001a)

China and South Asia are major centres for small arms, home to tens of millions of firearms each. Evidence from Chinese police suggests that firearms are rapidly becoming more plentiful. While a relatively low proportion of Chinese people own guns, the great size of the country's population makes absolute numbers high. In light of the large numbers of firearms confiscated by the police, China appears to have more publicly owned firearms than almost any other country in the world. India, by comparison, is a major military buyer. In a single military deal, India can purchase more firearms than most countries have in their entire armed forces stockpile.

Insurgent arsenals are growing fastest in Colombia, Palestine, Central Asia, and parts of Southeast Asia. They appear to be stable or diminishing elsewhere. The scale of global insurgent arsenals appears to be gradually declining. Apparently, erosion of public support led the Irish Republican Army to formally abandon control over some of its small, but politically potent, arsenal. Opposite trends are illustrated in Palestine, where the Intifada depends on small arms provided through the Oslo peace process, as well as weapons stolen or smuggled from Israel and supplied by foreign sponsors. The process was illustrated by revelations surrounding the fishing boat *Santorini*, intercepted in May 2001 and even more by the well-publicized interception of the arms freighter *Karine A* in January 2002.