

Trouble in Paradise:

SMALL ARMS IN THE PACIFIC



A former member of the Malaitan Eagle Force carries his gun after the group agreed to surrender their weapons in the Solomon Islands in August 2003.

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Pacific nations are no strangers to small arms. During the Second World War, island states in the region were home to thousands of armed troops and suffered many bloody conflicts. More recently, small arms have reappeared as vectors of death and injury in the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and even Australia.

Recent events in the Pacific offer clear lessons to others, both in success and failure. This chapter highlights innovative links between disarmament and national aspirations for autonomy. It surveys an island region unusually vulnerable to gunrunning, yet so far largely ignored by organized arms smugglers. Firearms misused in crime, conflict, and coups are traced to other sources, revealing a single prominent pattern of origin.

Unlike its neighbours in South East and South Asia, the region is not afflicted with large-scale trafficking. Yet the Pacific experience demonstrates how deeply even a limited number of small arms can damage small communities. Armed conflict and violent crime have had profound social and economic effects in the region, not least on the prospects of young Pacific Islanders.

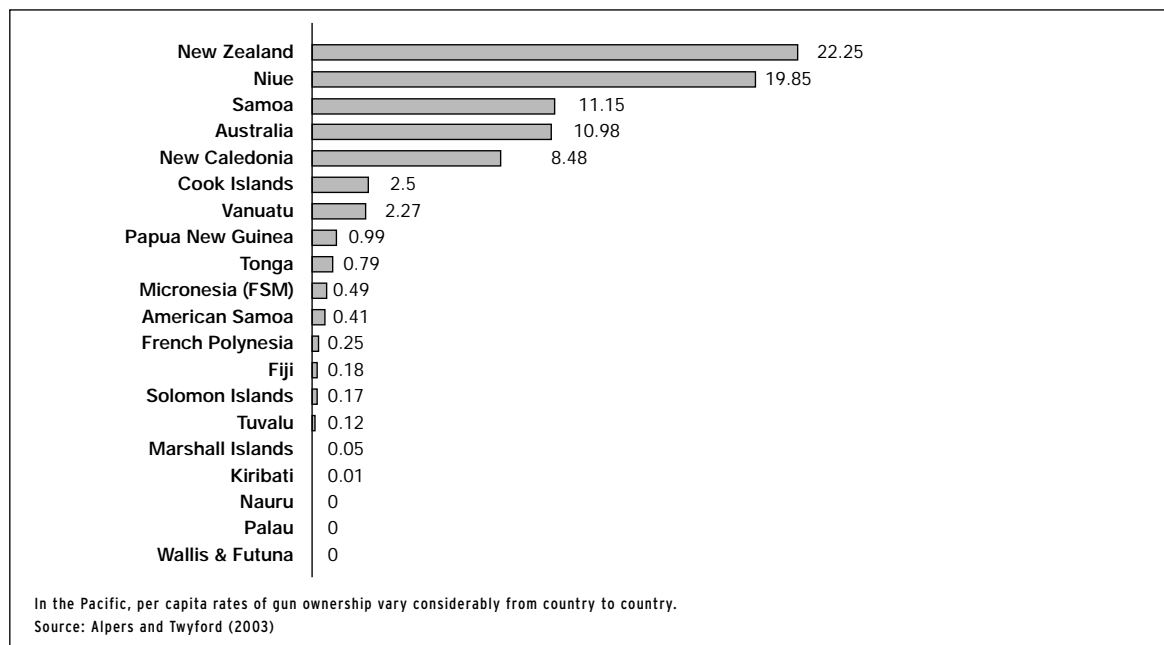
Among the chapter's principal findings are the following:

- Civilian gun ownership in the Pacific is higher than the global average. There are some 3.1 million privately owned firearms, the great majority of which are in Australia (11 per 100 people) and New Zealand (22 per 100 people).
- Security stockpiles in the Pacific are moderate. Police and armed forces hold an estimated 226,046 firearms, or one-fourteenth of the civilian stockpile.
- At least 26 nations export small arms to the Pacific. The United States is the largest exporter and provides more than half of all known Pacific imports.
- Gun smuggling is rare, though Papua New Guinea remains a hot spot.
- Gun laws are inconsistent and contain many loopholes. Until firearm legislation in the Pacific is harmonized, the region remains vulnerable to gunrunning.
- Craft manufacture is common. Crude home-made guns are locally manufactured in times of scarcity and conflict, but their relative importance is often overrated.
- Weapon disposal efforts have yielded positive results. In the recently conflict-torn Solomon Islands and Bougainville, disarmament is now firmly linked to progressive political reform, social stability, and economic development.

In the Pacific, disarmament is firmly linked to social stability and development.

The first section of this chapter considers the scale and volume of legal exports, imports, and known holdings among civilians and security forces. The second section turns to some of the vectors of the illegal trade, including smuggling, leakage from civilian and official stockpiles, and armed crime. The third section reveals the human costs associated with firearm availability and misuse in the Fiji Islands, the Solomon Islands, and Bougainville. The fourth section relates recent experiences with weapon collection and destruction in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands, while the final section summarizes arms-related legislation in the Pacific.

Figure 9.1 Rate of lawful civilian firearm ownership per 100 population in 20 Pacific nations



The line between the legal and illegal small arms trade is as blurred in the Pacific region as it is anywhere. The great majority of illicit, commercially manufactured small arms have entered each country as legal weapons. Firearms seized following crime and conflict, collected during gun amnesties, and encountered in routine policing are commonly sourced to licensed gun owners and dealers and to state-owned armouries. With the possible exception of Papua New Guinea, domestic leakage of legally held guns greatly exceeds the volume of firearms smuggled into the region.

In Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea, groups bent on rebellion, intimidation, and profit have treated state-owned armouries as gun supermarkets, helping themselves to weapons when needed. Stolen military small arms fuelled a variety of police and defence force insurrections, made possible the overthrow of elected governments, and greatly increased the lethality of armed crime and tribal and ethnic conflict.

Four years of armed conflict and instability in the Solomon Islands quickly reversed a decade of social and economic gains, nudging the nation into gun-fuelled anarchy, and social and economic failure. In the widespread debate that surrounded the multinational armed intervention force to the Solomons in July 2003, nothing was accorded more urgency than the drive to collect and destroy firearms and ammunition.

Bougainville's nine-year crisis was the longest and most devastating conflict in the Pacific since the Second World War, with many thousands killed. Following an innovative approach linking disarmament with an eventual referendum on national autonomy, Bougainvilleans and their neighbours now see the destruction of small arms as essential to renewed development, good health, education, and prosperity.

In the Pacific, the proliferation and misuse of firearms has been identified as the most immediate impediment to recovery in the Solomon Islands, Bougainville, and more recently to the development prospects of mainland Papua New Guinea.