

# A Constant Threat

## ARMED GROUPS IN WEST AFRICA

The number of conflicts involving one or more armed groups has eclipsed those involving only states. In West Africa, the proliferation of armed groups is a phenomenon of particular concern. Unlike state security forces, which have heavy weapons at their disposal, armed groups principally rely on small arms and light weapons. This chapter focuses on the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region to investigate the dynamics of small arms acquisition, management, and control by armed groups. It then looks into control and reduction measures that can help to minimize the deleterious effects of conflict and prevent future fighting.

What measures can be taken to address the problem of armed groups in West Africa? Normative moral persuasion, attempting to influence armed groups' actions through an appeal to norms of behaviour, is an important but insufficient means of engagement. Experience from West Africa suggests that providing incentives (such as job creation and security sector reform), affecting, in particular, the demand for weapons, is more effective.

West African armed groups are diverse (from pro-government militias to rebel groups to vigilantes) as well as volatile, and their motivations, allegiances, and scope of operations are likely to shift over time. Armed groups have a tendency to outlive the period during which they were deemed politically useful and will reinvent themselves as the incentive arises. In the end, it is the local communities that suffer from these young men's robberies and vigilantism. To enable description of such changes, this chapter identifies armed groups using a neutral, broad definition proposed by Pablo Policzer: 'Non-state armed groups are challengers to the state's monopoly of legitimate coercive force.'

**Armed groups have a tendency to outlive their initial political use.**

Multiple considerations likely contribute to a person's decision to enlist in an armed group. Many people in West Africa conclude they have good reason (such as a breakdown in public security or unemployment) to acquire or retain weapons, so addressing the



Rebel troops patrol the jungle outside Bouake, Côte d'Ivoire, in October 2002. © Sven Torfinn/Panos Pictures



A LURD fighter poses with her weapon at a UN disarmament point in May 2004. Originally from Sierra Leone, she had been caught up in the war in Liberia.  
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motives underpinning weapons demand is crucial to stemming the proliferation of small arms in the region. Supply-side measures for small arms control, though also important, are of limited utility in a region already awash in guns.

Whether leaked through theft, seizure, corruption, or the creation of a pro-government militia intended to shore up a leader's hold on power, government stockpiles are a primary source of armament for armed groups. Weapons shipments from outside the region continue to take place despite the 1998 ECOWAS Moratorium. Appreciating the regional dimension of this trade is important, as many such shipments begin as legal state-to-state transfers that are then diverted to armed elements in a neighbouring country. The 'ant trade', the steady trickle of weapons across the region's porous borders, also serves as a source of armament.

In the ECOWAS region, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) initiatives have been carried out in Liberia, Mali, Niger, and Sierra Leone, with more planned for Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal. Through such programmes, some 200,000 weapons were collected in 1998–2004. The poor quality of weapons collected, however, suggests that better models con-

tinue to circulate. Moreover, the record of DDR programmes in helping demobilized fighters obtain gainful employment has been dismal, and evidence of re-recruitment has emerged throughout the region. Arms for development projects that target whole communities rather than strictly ex-fighters show promise at addressing these concerns.

The chapter's main findings include the following:

- Armed groups have easy access to the robust market for small arms and light weapons in West Africa.
- Recirculation of small arms stockpiles among conflict areas (including leakage from government stocks, corruption, and craft production) remains substantial.
- Reducing supplies of ammunition is an underutilized means of limiting the deleterious effects of small arms conflict.
- Weapons collection programmes in West Africa have had some success, but the quality of weapons collected is questionable.
- A lack of alternative employment opportunities may drive demobilized ex-fighters to return to fighting in an armed group.
- Supply-side interventions alone will not curb groups' access to small arms, and efforts to reform the security sector are needed to address groups' willingness to arm.
- Arms reduction efforts linked to development incentives show promise.

**Combatants are influenced more by peer pressure than norms of behaviour.**

Given the reigning culture of impunity for armed groups, attempts to influence behaviour must integrate concrete incentives. The weak command and control structures of many West African armed groups tend to undermine the persuasive power of norms, with peer pressure exerting a greater influence. Incentives should target combatants and their leaders as individuals and address the underlying motivations for armed violence. In the West African context, those incentives will more often be economic in nature than political. Successfully tackling the problem of armed groups requires in-depth analysis of specific local and regional dynamics. ■