

Regional stability

Regional stability is essential for poverty reduction in the world's poorest and most vulnerable nations. There are many threats to regional stability and in many cases these are fuelled by the availability of unmanaged and unregulated arms. All too often this can lead to a culture of fear and violence; insurgency; terrorism or, ultimately, widespread conflict.

The sheer quantity of arms available in unsecured locations across many of the countries in which MAG operates, particularly in Africa, is a massive and ongoing threat. Sales and the movement of arms dating back to the Cold War of the 1960s to the 1980s, when East and West fought their proxy wars in countries such as Angola and Mozambique, resulted in the supply of vast quantities of military hardware to various warring factions. A poorly regulated global arms industry prospered and, despite various sanctions, enabled the unfettered delivery of munitions and weapons through private brokers and other illicit systems to countries that were keen to maintain the flow of weaponry. This situation enabled protracted wars such as the one fought between Iraq and Iran during the 1980s to continue unabated. Later, following the breakup of the Soviet Union, large amounts of former Soviet arms and ammunition flowed into African countries for many years. In light of this, and other identified routes of arms being supplied to a wide variety of groups it is no wonder that arms caches being destroyed by MAG today contain items from all over the world and from different periods. Various sources estimate that there are around 600 million small arms and light weapons in circulation globally¹. In this respect, regional stability of developing nations is not only the responsibility of the nation involved, but also of the wider global community that contributed to or continues to ignore the ongoing illegal supply and trade of weapons.

This scenario is compounded by serious shortfalls in peace agreements and stabilisation efforts that follow conflict. Demobilisation of former soldiers for example, regularly resulted in very little actual destruction of their weapons. These are being stockpiled and either forgotten about or, more seriously, traded and used in neighbouring conflicts. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) the fragmentation of violence in weak states of the developing world appears to continue in 2009 and beyond, and carries with it protracted suffering for civilians and further regional instabilities². This is highlighted by a rapid increase in one-sided violence by non-state actors against civilians in the past year. This is no better illustrated than by the activities of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) since 1987. This self declared rebel group, formed in northern Uganda, has been able to remain heavily armed because of the relative ease in accessing stockpiled and abandoned weapons and ammunition in the region. It has wrought devastating and cross-border consequences throughout the region despite international efforts to bring the group to justice. Uganda, DR Congo, Central African Republic and Southern Sudan have all seen their civilian populations terrorised by means of rape, murder, mutilation and forced child soldier conscriptions.

This is but one illustration of the devastating impact of unchecked availability of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) on regional stability and poverty reduction initiatives. It is estimated that

there are approximately 26 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), the vast majority unable to access essential services such as food, water, health and shelter therefore escalating mortality and morbidity rates. Ongoing insecurity and discrimination prevents the displaced from seeking a safe return or a sustainable integration in the area they have fled to. The highest number of IDPs can be found in countries such as Sudan, Colombia and Iraq. These form the top three of 24 countries that faced new or ongoing local or regional conflict leading to displacement in 2008³.

Over the years MAG has been increasingly confronted by the threat posed by insecure and abandoned stockpiles that exist in conflict and post-conflict areas. In response MAG set up a series of Conventional Weapons Management and Disposal (CWMD) projects enabling to deal with SALW issues. MAG became involved with the destruction of SALW informally in the mid-1990s by using mine clearance and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) teams in countries like Angola and Cambodia where demobilisation of combatants was taking place. Later, through the course of mine action survey activities large stocks of abandoned ammunition and weapons were identified in countries such as DR Congo and Sudan. These were of such a size that specific projects to carry out their destruction were developed, leading to the discovery and destruction of hundreds of Man Portable Air Defence Systems (MANPADS). MAG's involvement has continued to grow steadily with additional projects in Burundi, the Republic of Congo and Rwanda. Its activities have now expanded from destruction to conducting surveys and improvement of storage facilities, as well as training in safe management of ammunition depots and armouries for various police and military agencies. This has only been possible through the close cooperation with the respective governments and with the support of National Focus Points that have been established in each of the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa countries.

Through managing legitimate stockpiles, training national police and armed forces as well as destroying abandoned excess weapons and munition stocks, MAG is able to provide practical solutions that address this threat. The fragile tectonics in the African regions of the Great Lakes and the Horn require well coordinated responses that can bring together national planning and operational initiatives. Therefore MAG has worked closely to support the work of the Nairobi based Regional Centre on Small Arms (RECSA). These are initial steps that will hopefully lead to growing commitment to programmes of weapons management and destruction alongside safely securing and storing legitimate stocks of arms as well as attention to the political dimensions of regional and sub-regional conflict.

The illegal trade in, prevalence and uncontrolled availability of SALW hamper relief and peace efforts. At the same time, long term development initiatives and sustainable economic regeneration in post-conflict areas are impacted and these are all essential building blocks for regional stability. Building on its years of experience MAG looks to be part of the process of breaking the key links in this negative chain of SALW availability that continue to pose a threat to the security and livelihoods of millions of people.

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¹ smallarmssurvey.org; grip.org; globalpolicy.org.

² Bates, Gill, Introduction. International security, armaments and disarmament in 2008, SIPRI Yearbook 2009 (Stockholm, 2009).

³ IDMC, Internal Displacement at record high, Press release (New York, 2009).

**Regional stability is essential
for growth and poverty reduction**



Stockpile of arms, ordnance and ammunition discovered in an unsecured building, close to houses in Sudan.