

Marking and Tracing: A Critical Link in Combating the Proliferation of Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons

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Introduction

The Group of Government Experts appointed by the former UN Secretary General, Mr Kofi Anan, defines arms tracing as the “systematic tracking of one or more illicit weapons found or seized on the territory of a State from their source (the manufacturer or last legal importer or last legal owner, as applicable), through the lines of supply, to the point, if any, at which they were diverted into the illicit market, and ultimately to the person or group that last possessed them. Tracing depends primarily on the adequate marking of each weapon at the time of manufacture and if appropriate, import, the keeping of accurate and comprehensive records on all weapons under the jurisdiction of the State and the exchange of information and international cooperation between States, as well as with relevant international organizations.”

While accepting the report of the experts, the Secretary General observed that “It is a well-known fact that the overwhelming majority of small arms and light weapons start their life cycle as legally produced commodities. However, many such weapons are diverted to illicit markets through unlawful transfers, theft or the breakdown of State control. In this context, the tracing of illicit small arms and light weapons becomes a critical factor for success in the struggle to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects.”

The UN Programme of Action (PoA) to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects calls on State Parties to ensure that licensed manufacturers apply an appropriate and reliable marking on each small arm and light weapon (SALW) as an integral part of the production process. This marking should include a serial number and information to identify the manufacturer and country of origin of each weapon. Such information will enable authorities in any country to identify and trace each weapon.

The Nairobi Protocol defines tracing as the systematic tracking of SALW from manufacturer to purchaser for the purpose of assisting the authorities in State Parties to detect and investigate illicit manufacturing and trafficking. State Parties should therefore, have and keep records of such SALW and related transactions.

The guidelines already issued by RECSA as best practice in record keeping, import, export, and transfer of SALW are applicable in tracing.

The Nairobi Protocol requires RECSA Member States to mark each SALW in possession of the State at the time of manufacture or import with a unique mark for easy identification. In addition, the State Parties commit themselves to maintain records on legally owned SALW in the country (and illegal ones if available) for not less than 10 years. This information should be

exchanged freely amongst themselves or through RECSA and National Focal Points to promote joint efforts in fighting the problem of SALW.

The Importance of Tracing

Successfully tracing the origins of illegal SALW forms a critical link in the current operational initiatives to combat their proliferation and use in criminal activities.

Current national and sub-regional action to successfully address the problem in Africa is hampered by a lack of verifiable data on the origins of illicit SALW. Unless Law Enforcement Agencies in the various countries are armed with facts and data and are able to identify these sources, illegal guns will continue to be a menace for a long time to come.

In addition, a standard operational procedure for tracing illicit SALW should be put in place to guide law enforcement agencies.

Although greater effort is currently put into the recovery of illegal SALW throughout the international community, very little is done to trace the origin and the dysfunctions relating to losses, to understand and rectify the existing problems, or to establish where possession or control over particular arms was lost in relation to where they were recovered and/or used in crime or violence.

Any lessons to be learned are currently lost due to limited expertise in tracing of SALW. Any information gleaned from the process is seldom analysed or utilised in further actions in combating the problem of SALW.

Tracing is a key determinant to the success of the war against the proliferation of illicit SALW. The process is aimed at tracking all SALW, identifying those used in criminal activities and identifying and addressing weaknesses in control processes.

Efforts in the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa Region to strengthen national capacities in marking and tracing SALW

Training and capacity building on record keeping has been carried out at the national and regional levels in a number of RECSA Member States. In addition, in order to improve record keeping and data management in the countries, RECSA has acquired computers for each Member State to facilitate creation of databases on SALW under State control.

RECSA has acquired one electronic machine for marking small arms in State possession in its Member States. The machines, which were procured with financial assistance of the US Government, and the East African Community through the EAC/GTZ and RECSA collaboration, have already been sent to the various Governments (with the exception of Somalia) for use by the Police force.

Further funding by the US Government has enabled RECSA to acquire a second machine for the Member States to be used by the Military. It is hoped that with additional funding, other marking machines can be acquired for other law enforcement agencies for the marking of their arms.

Donation of the equipment and national and regional trainings in the use of the machine has marked the official launch of the arms marking process in conformity with the provisions of the Nairobi Protocol. Uganda and Rwanda had commenced arms marking before donation of the equipment; the electronic machine is expected to speed up the process. Rwanda, for example, was marking its arms manually, which is a slow process due to its labour intensive nature.



Participants from RECSA Member States at a regional training on the use of the electronic marking machine

Conclusion

Marking and tracing is crucial in the fight against the proliferation of illicit SALW. RECSA, on behalf of the Member States, hopes for a clear global instrument to guide the process.

Our goal as an intergovernmental body mandated to implement international and regional instruments on small arms is to ensure that the region remains ahead in complying with commitments made.