

## **Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation and Insecurity in Nigeria: Nexus and Implications for National Stability**

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**Abstract:** The proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons is a worldwide, progressively complex and multifaceted phenomenon that affects people and insecurity of countries the world over. Readily available and easy to use, small arms and light weapons have been the primary or sole tool of violence in almost all conflicts in every part of the globe. In the hands of irregular troops operating with scant respect of international and humanitarian law, these weapons have taken a heavy toll on human lives, with women and children accounting for more of the casualties. While not by themselves causing the conflict in which they are used, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons affect the intensity and duration of violence and encourages militancy rather than a peaceful resolution of unsettled differences. Perhaps most grievously, we see a vicious circle in which insecurity leads to a higher demand for weapons which itself breed still greater insecurity. This paper has the objectives of identifying the sources and proliferation of SALW, examining the links between small arms and light weapons proliferation and insecurity in Nigeria. It also focuses on factors driving SALW proliferation in Nigeria, effects of arms flow to Nigeria. The paper went further to proffer some recommendations that if the government and all stake holders take will address the menace and thereby ensure national stability.

**KEY WORDS:** Small Arms and Light Weapons, Insecurity, National stability.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria's internal security environment has deteriorated in the last decade. Old security threats have remained or even assumed worrisome dimensions, while new threats have emerged. Some of the old threats that assumed new dimensions include small arms and light weapons (SALW) proliferation, armed robbery, ethno-religious conflicts, farmers-herders violence, militancy, assassinations, human trafficking and kidnapping. Threats considered to be relatively new in Nigeria – though not without precedent, in the strict sense of it – are the outbreak of Islamic extremism and domestic terrorism, evident in the growing audacity of the Boko Haram sect (Onouha, 2010).

A common denominator in the manifestation of both old and new threats is the use of SALWs. Thus, Nigerianow features prominently in the three-spot continuum of transnational organized trafficking of SALWs in West Africa: origin, transit route and destination. Weapons in circulation in Nigeria come from local fabrication, residue of guns used during the civil war, thefts from government armories, smuggling, dishonest government-accredited importers, ethnic militias, insurgents from neighboring countries and some multinational oil corporations operating in the oil-rich Niger Delta (Efijeh, 2006). When and where these SALWs are deployed, national security and stability is affected,

The first small arms came into general use at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Initially they were nothing more than small cannon held in the hands, fired by placing lighted matches at touch hole. Later a stock was added-the match lock and the first real handgun. Perhaps, gun possession by civilians in Nigeria today, is not a new and predates colonialism. Guns were introduced by the Europeans prior to colonialism during legitimate and illegitimate (slave) trade between them and Africans. Subsequently, guns and other arms, ammunition and weapons were used by Europeans to realize their imperial ambitions when they used force to suppress Africa's resistance to European incursion, conquest and colonialism.

The gunboat diplomacy was popularly employed by the British to compel African chiefs to enter into various treaties with them. There was establishment of West African Frontier Force (WAFF) used by the British to execute the British-Aro War of (1901-1902), and other forms of resistance in Nigeria, West Africa and Africa. The role of Royal Niger Company (RNC) later United African Company (UAC) backed by British Government in using force to suppress dissenting communities is imperative (Chuma-Okoro, 2011). These arms

or guns possibly found their ways to the hands of Africans during the period of colonialism subsequently used in tradition and hunting in the rural community. In no time, guns and gun powder became symbols of strength and power, and were later transformed into ceremonial weapons displayed during funerals, burials ceremonies and customary festivals among the natives. They also become symbols of individual and ethnic grandeur, and for deterring aggressors and invaders. Today, guns are no longer just ornaments of prestige, or just for hunting, safari and expedition.

Guns have transformed in terms of functionality, lethality, sophistication, ubiquity and motive of ownership. They have become more of criminality and instruments of underworld (Chuma-Okoro, 2011). Ostensible; the 1959 Firearms Act was enacted to check the increasing rate of arms proliferation in Nigeria towards independence. The failure of the Nigerian government to execute a comprehensive disarmament and arms destruction programme after the civil war (1967-1970) exacerbated the proliferation of guns and illicit arms trafficking.

Today, the high rate of illegal procurement and use of SALWs in Nigeria is indexed by the intermittent seizure of these weapons by security and border control officers, the frequency of deployment of these arms in conflict and crime scenes and the level of human casualty and material damage recorded in the aftermath of its use in the country. For instance, the quantity of arms surrendered during disarmament and demobilization over the years across the country gave an idea of the quantum of SALWs proliferation in Nigeria. Also, the regular interception of illegal arms trafficking within and across the borders by security agencies also reveals the worrisome dimension that arms proliferation has recently assumed in the country. The media is awash with frightening reports of sophisticated SALWs being seized by security operatives either at ports, borders, highways or crime and conflict scenes.

## II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

### **Small arms and light weapons:**

This paper adopts the definition of small arms and light weapons provided by the economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) Convention. 'Small arms' here refers to arms used by one person, and which include firearms and other destructive arms or devices such as exploding bombs, incendiary bombs or gas bombs, grenades, rocket launchers, missiles, missile systems or landmines, revolvers and pistols with automatic loading, rifles and carbines, machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns. 'Light weapons' on the other hand are portable arms designed to be used by several persons working together in a team, and which include notable: heavy machine guns, portable grenade launchers, mobile or mounted portable anti-aircraft cannons, portable anti-tank cannons, non-recoil guns, portable anti-tank missile launchers, and mortars with a caliber of less than 100 millimeters (ECOWAS, 2006).

### **Insecurity:**

Hasan (2005) defines insecurity as a fact of life for the poor urban citizens of many countries. According to him, it may arise from the lack of secure housing tenure, which means living with the constant fear of eviction or it may reflect high levels of personal insecurity stemming from police harassment, abuse in the hands of bureaucracies or the breakdown of public safety in the neighborhood. Insecurity therefore, implies the absence of security. It is the direct opposite of security. It is the absence of safety of individuals, state or organization against criminal activities such as terrorism, kidnapping, robbery, thuggery, cultism, ethno-religious crises and gangsterism.

### **National stability:**

National stability is a situation where there is a relative maintenance of law and order, relations among communities are stabilized; with available and predictable conflict resolution mechanisms; there are some basic consensus over national values and interest, and acceptable processes of political succession, power sharing and relatively equitable distribution of scarce but allocatable resources (Elaigu, 2000). National stability therefore, refers to the nation's ability to remain balance and or possess this capacity to ensure that things happen the way they should, without manifesting changes that could threaten the total peaceful coexistence of its citizens. It is the absence of threat to life, property and socioeconomic well being of the people.

### **Links between small arms and light weapons proliferation and insecurity:**

The relationship between SALWs and insecurity has been the object of contentious debates among scholars. While some scholars argue that small arms are the direct cause of insecurity, others maintain that small arms are merely trigger of insecurity or precipitating factor. Despite this seeming apparent disagreement, both scholars commonly agree that the proliferation of SALWs poses serious challenges to the sustenance of peace and stability of any country. They further assert that availability of small arms have direct influence on the escalation and sustenance of insecurity. In his famous year 2000 millennium report to the United Nations

General Assembly (UNGA), the then Secretary General, Kofi Anan, brought to the forefront of UN's agenda by noting as follows:

*The death toll from SALWs dwarfs that of all other weapon systems and in most years greatly exceeds the toll of atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In terms of the carnage they cause, small arms, indeed, could well be described as Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD). SALWs proliferation not merely a security issue, it is also an issue of human right and development. The proliferation of small arms sustains and exacerbates armed conflicts. It endangers peace keepers and workers. It undermines respect for international humanitarian laws. It threatens legitimate but weak government and it benefits terrorists as well as the perpetrators of organized crime* (Kofi, 2010).

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons is often one of the major security challenges currently facing Nigeria, Africa and indeed the world in general. The trafficking and wide availability of these weapons fuel communal conflict, political instability and pose a threat, not only to security, but also to sustainable development. The widespread proliferation of small arms is contributing to alarming levels of armed crime, and militancy (Nte, 2011). Increased proliferation of SALWs in Nigeria and the corresponding increase in their accessibility deepens the tendency of the average person to resort to violence as a means of dispute resolution. Weapons proliferation thus increases the potential for violence and violent conflict, armed robbery, kidnapping, terrorism, farmers/herders clashes, cattle rusting, gangsterism, cultism in Nigeria and by extension, threatens to retard development, cause massive human and physical destruction, serious human infractions and a chronic atmosphere of instability and insecurity in the country. Caleb and Okafor, (2015) posit that, the different forms of security challenges plaguing Nigeria as a country are multiple- from those of armed robbery to kidnappings, from ethno-religious and farmers-herders crises to outright terrorism and insurgencies against the authority of state. These states of insecurity according to them have connection with the massive proliferation of small arms and light weapons. According to Ngang, (2007), SALWs are widely used in domestic and gender related crimes, help facilitate violent crimes and thus has contributed directly to greater insecurity in Nigeria. Insecurity associated with SALWs proliferation in Nigeria is evident in the present clashes between farmers and herders, the frequent attacks by the dreaded Boko Haram, kidnappings, militancy in the Niger Delta, armed robbery, cultism and political violence.

#### **Sources of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria:**

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria could be attributed to a number of factors, prominent among them were: the surplus arms that were provided during the cold war by the two opposing super powers. These arms were pumped to serve proxy inter-state conflicts; Massive flow of weapons from central and Eastern Europe and the loosening control of arms industry as a result of the collapse of Soviet Union. Following the end of cold war, these arms in circulation lost their way into the hands of illegal arms dealers, security entrepreneurs, ethnic militia groups, private military companies, and local smugglers there by fueling conflicts and facilitating insecurity in Nigeria. Other sources are the intractable supplies from current and past conflict zones, stolen arms from the state security service, leakage from government armories' in which corrupt law enforcement and military personnel selling their weapons. According to musah (2008), the small arms found their way into civilian hands from official sources due to a combination of factors including the breakdown of state structures, lax control over national armories and poor service conditions for security personnel. Others are growing domestic artisan production scattered across Nigeria and other countries of West Africa sub-region, which passes down established trade routes (Musa, 2002; Bah, 2004; Badmus, 2009). The spread of arms in Nigeria has continued, despite efforts to control it, due to the nature of Nigeria's borders and the role of third parties and the entry of new actors. Proliferation of arms in Nigeria is made possible because these arms are "small" and are easy to transport or hide (Diarra, 2005; Yacubu, 2005).

#### **Factors driving small arms and light weapons proliferation in Nigeria:**

The high rate accumulation of SALWs in Nigeria is a product of the interplay of several interrelated factors. In the first place, there is a general lack of transparency around the arms trade. Nigeria considers its arms policy to be secret, which makes it hard to access. Similarly, arms dealers promote corruption by involving some countries in illegal activity. Insecurity in Nigeria also makes it easy for small arms to enter illicit circulation through theft, leakage or re-sale. Secondly, SALWs by virtue of their several characteristics make them very attractive to paramilitary and irregular forces and even untrained civilians thereby aiding in their proliferation. Apart from government's increased demand for SALWs to counter political insurgency and suppress domestic opposition movements, a number of different factors account for their high desirability in Nigeria. According to Boutwell and Klare (2000), Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) are —widely available, very cheap and durable, deadly, easy to use and easy to transport and smuggle. Jekada (2005), argues further that, —the low price and the technical plainness of small arms; easy in delivery and concealment as well as maintenance capabilities; tactical considerations – use in killing and intimidation of people; and their highly

effective nature from a combat point of view, make SALW attractive to non-State actors who significantly lack the capacity to procure and operate more sophisticated heavy weapons. Their simplicity makes them easy to operate even by people who have had very little or no military training. According to Onuaha(2012), proliferation of SALWs derive principally from the internal socio-economic and political dynamics of Nigeria compounded by globalization. He further identifies the following as factors that necessitate the proliferation of SALWs in Nigeria:

**The crude nature of Nigeria's politics:** The crude nature of Nigerian politics is one of key factor driving the process of SALWs proliferation. Politics in Nigeria, especially electoral politics according to him is defined and approached by politicians as a do or die affair, or warfare. The stake in Nigerian politics is incredibly high, making politicians desperate in the struggle to win elective positions. As a result, many of them recruit 'specialist of violence'-cultists, gangs and thugs to attain and retain political power.

**Insecurity:** The inability of the Nigerian state to provide public security has demonstrates visible weakness in controlling the use of violence within its territory. As a result, its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence is increasingly up for grabs by criminals, militants, warring communities and other forms of non-state actors. The consequence is the intermittent outbreak of violent conflicts and general insecurity.

**Governance failure:** Governance failure contributes to SALWs proliferation in Nigeria. The inability of state actors, agencies and institutions to use public recourses and authorities to ensure the protection of lives and properties as well as delivery of public goods resulting to mounting poverty and unemployment. This has led many to indulge into criminal activities such as piracy, armed robbery kidnapping, militancy which contribute to the demand of arms penetration and circulation.

**Corruption:** Corruption creates a security paradox that feeds into the cycle of SALWs proliferation in Nigeria. Corruption has become largely institutionalized in both the public and private sectors in Nigeria and the security sector has become worse for it. Given wide spread poverty and low wages of security agents, some greedy security personnel are easily corrupted by transnational arms trafficking in Nigeria.

**Globalization:** The challenges of containing SALWS proliferation is compounded by contradictions inherent in globalization. The process of globalization has congealed both time and space, making it easier for ideas, goods, persons, services, information, products and money to move across borders with fewer restrictions. This has enhanced the movement of goods and people across borders and equally facilitated the activities of criminal groups.

#### **Effects of small arms and light weapons proliferation on national security:**

Small arms and light weapons proliferations have devastating impacts on Nigeria's national security thereby threatening its stability. Proliferation of SALWs has created a culture of violence within Nigeria and an upsurge of criminal activities that is threatening the peace, security and economy of Nigeria. The deployment of illicit small arms in conflicts prone areas aggravates their intensity and gruesomeness and their impacts are felt not only by the victims but by the society as a whole. Possession of firearms can provoke the temptation to commit heinous crimes such as rape, robbery, kidnapping, cultism and culpable homicide thereby increasing the scale of premeditated violence through the use of firearms. It is in this respect that it is opined that proliferation of SALW contributes to the rate of crimes and violence in Nigeria (Ngang, 2007). The overall effects of this are breakdown of law and order and undermining the rule of law in all its ramifications (Abdullahi, 2015).

Civil wars, communal violence and social unrests involving the use of high volumes of SALWs have directly inflicted deep human and material wounds on Nigeria. The impact of these conflicts on vulnerable groups, such as women and children is particularly destructive (GIABA, 2013). Equally devastating is the considerable collateral damage caused by SALW-fuelled conflicts. In particular, the countless deaths through forced displacement, loss of access to healthcare, etc, cannot be overstated. The widespread availability and access to small arms often results in massive population displacement, uprooting millions of children and their families from their homes and making children more susceptible to disease, violence, military recruitment, and sexual assault. As a result of recurrent violent conflicts, Nigeria is faced with the Herculean task of responding to a fluctuating but always sizeable number of internally displaced persons (IDPs). The destruction of properties and communities including deprivation of sources of income and deprivation of right to family, resulting in considerable psychological trauma and creation of large number of refugees dependent on humanitarian aid are all direct effects of conflicts and violence involving SALWs (GIABA, 2013).

Although Nigeria's problem with SALWs is not new, its increasing availability has helped stoke a wave of insurgencies, ethno-religious conflicts, cross-border banditry, farmers/herders clashes and other violent crimes. According to Inter-Governmental Action Group Against Money Laundry in West Africa (GIABA), weapons proliferation increases the potential for violence and violent conflicts in the West African sub-region and, by extension, threatens to retard development, cause massive human and physical destruction, serious human rights infractions, and a chronic atmosphere of instability and insecurity (GIABA, 2013). SALW-fuelled conflicts have severely damaged governance systems and eroded popular confidence in them, and

destroyed hitherto peaceful relationships amongst communities and groups in Nigeria. More importantly, SALW trafficking and proliferation continue to pose serious threats to the rule of law and economic growth and development in Nigeria (GIABA, 2013). Besides, it equally discourages foreign investments and therefore damages the prospect of economic development (Dappa and Omale, 2016). Hutchful (2000) observes that most states and region experiencing problem with armed violence stemming from the excessive and destabilizing accumulation and transfer of small arms and light weapons also have problems of poverty and lack economic development. Similarly, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons increase community conflict. Conflict is part of society, but communities who often have conflict may be due to boundary disputes, etc.; and with the proliferation, conflict are more readily resolved by force of arms. There is a spiral of insecurity as citizens arm themselves against these effects of proliferation of arms and for self defense. So State experiencing these effects must expend scarce resources for increased security and health services (Dappa and Omale, 2016).

### **III. CONCLUSION**

Security challenges, including the proliferation of small arms and light weapons have been a global concern for a very long time, however, the negative impacts of this and other security threats can be largely minimized and their effects on both individuals and the country reduced. The war against small arms and light weapons proliferation-illegal manufacture, sale and transfer can only be close to success when sincere and responsible leadership, responsible followership, coupled with realistic policies and strategies that reflect the needs and aspirations of the citizens become characteristics of the country. Though it is very difficult to completely eradicate the illegal proliferation of SALWs in Nigeria, especially because of the very nature of the country with regards to conflict, however, such proliferation can be tremendously curtailed if the welfare and safety needs of Nigerians are met.

### **IV. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Small Arms and Light Weapons are becoming endemic in Nigeria and the rate of accumulation is increasing with their concomitant destabilizing effect. Therefore a successful resolution of SALW syndrome in Nigeria requires a holistic approach that addresses the underlying factors creating the demands for SALW and the sources of supply, rather than treating the SALW problem as an independent or a compartmentalized issue. The demand and supply factors of SALW proliferation are mutually dependent. Therefore, addressing one without the other may not produce the desired results. The researchers therefore, recommend the following to curb the proliferation of SALWs:-

\*There is need for concerted and collective efforts among stakeholders at all levels of the society to curtail illicit SALWs proliferation. Hence, capacities of stakeholders should be enhanced to ensure effective implementation of result-oriented programs and formulation of evidence-based policies;

\* There is a need for interventions at the national, state and local levels to be strengthened and promote peaceful coexistence amongst the diverse ethno-religious and political groups in Nigeria. This would help minimize the outbreak and persistence of violent conflicts that stoke arms proliferation;

\*There is need for an improved border management mechanism using modern and sophisticated detection equipment to discourage arms trafficking through the borders. Also, effective strategies should be deployed to police the numerous unauthorized entry/exit routes in the country, recognizing the need to enlist the support and cooperation of border communities;

\*There is need for a review of the Fire Arms Act with stringent penalties in order to address the current challenges associated with SALWs proliferation. The three arms of government and all stakeholders should as a matter of fact make and implement laws pertaining to the manufacture, importation, storage and possessions of firearms;

\*There is need to establish and strengthen institutional frameworks for the control of illicit SALWs proliferation to ensure an effective, coordinated and consistent implementation of arms control programs in the country.

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