

Insights and Mysteries: GLOBAL SMALL ARMS TRANSFERS

The international trade in small arms and light weapons links many of the world’s producers and customers. Whether a deal is conducted under full government oversight, or between parties acting illegally, it is the international trade that supplies the small arms that are involved in many of the world’s conflicts. The key findings of this chapter are:

- The total value of *documented* firearms and ammunition exports in 2000—the most recent year for which reliable data is available—was approximately USD 2.1 billion.
- This represents some 52 per cent of the estimated value of the total legal international trade in small arms and light weapons, estimated at USD 4 billion a year.
- The illicit trade is probably worth less than USD 1 billion a year.
- The majority of countries involved in the small arms trade still fail to provide annual reports on their arms exports and imports.
- The value and volume of the international small arms trade appears to have declined since the mid-1990s, led by a dramatic fall in the trade in military weapons and most types of pistols and revolvers.
- Over the same period, the trade in civilian firearms has only slightly declined; the proportion of civilian firearms has grown and, in recent years, eclipsed the trade in military weapons.



A Taiwanese coast guard official inspects smuggled weapons that have been confiscated from a fishing boat.

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The total value of documented small arms exports in the year 2000 was USD 2.1 billion.

The global distribution of this trade is shown below:

Table 3.2 Value of documented small arms exports by region, 2000

Region	Value (millions of current USD)
European Union	869
North America	692
Non-EU Europe	243
South America	104
Northeast Asia	65
Central and South Asia	51
Middle East	35
Sub-Saharan Africa	16
Southeast Asia	8
Pacific	4
Total	2,087

Note: No reliable data or only partial information is available on many exporters. EU total includes intra-EU trade.

Sources: UN, 2002 (COMTRADE customs codes 930100, 930200, 930320, 930330, 930621, 930630) and various national reports

Some 52 per cent of the total trade in small arms worth approximately USD 4 billion a year can be definitively documented from official sources.

Table 3.3 Value of documented small arms imports by region, 2000

Region	Value (millions of current USD)
North America	499
European Union	485
Middle East	285
Northeast Asia	98
Non-EU Europe	78
South America	48
Pacific	43
Southeast Asia	38
South Asia	36
Sub-Saharan Africa	27
Total	1,637

Note: No reliable data or only partial information is available on many importers. EU total includes intra-EU trade.
Source: UN, 2002 (COMTRADE customs codes 930100, 930200, 930320, 930330, 930621, 930630)

The total value of identified exports, USD 2.1 billion, is larger than the value of identifiable small arms imports, USD 1.64 billion, due to disparities in national reporting practices. Because of difficulties in obtaining comprehensive trade data, all figures presented here should be regarded as suggestive rather than authoritative.

The majority of countries involved in the small arms trade still fail to provide comprehensive official data on their annual arms exports and imports. While much information can be obtained from unofficial sources such as press reports, a significant proportion of the global trade in small arms is conducted in secrecy, reinforcing an environment in which corruption and black markets thrive. However, it is encouraging that the number of countries publishing annual arms export reports, and the quality of information provided, are improving.

Most of the countries involved in the small arms trade still fail to provide annual arms export reports.

The declining trend in the value of the international trade in small arms appears to have continued since 2000. The observed fall in the value of the trade in military weapons may well have been influenced by the decline in communal and inter-state violence that was widely observed from the mid-1990s. In recent years, compelled by the pressures of impending EU and NATO membership and international criticism of those states perceived as supplying proscribed customers, many post-Soviet countries have tried to repair their reputations and appear to have introduced more restrictive export policies.

While the value of the illicit trade in small arms is certainly lower than the government-authorized trade, illicit deals are frequently the most sensitive. One illustrative example of the illicit trade was highlighted in October 2002 by a United Nations report on transfers to embargoed Liberia. The report documents six air-freight shipments carrying surplus Yugoslav equipment, which between 31 May and 25 August 2002, delivered 210 tons of small arms, light weapons, and ammunition to Liberia. The consignments included 5,000 automatic rifles, over four million rounds of rifle ammunition, machine guns, pistols, grenade launchers, and hand grenades. The shipments were accompanied with false end-user certificates indicating that the equipment was bound for Nigeria. The aircraft manifests falsely listed civilian goods and other destinations in the region.

A striking characteristic of the six shipments is the sheer depth and comprehensiveness of the law-breaking. They required the systematic and open evasion of a wide spectrum of legal prohibitions, including false end-user certification, false shipping manifests, violation of the ECOWAS moratorium and UN sanctions, flouting of the ban on travel by Liberian officials, as well as reliance on payment through prohibited trade in diamonds and other contraband materials.

Weapons shipments such as those to Liberia are among the most likely to be used in armed conflict. They provide evidence that, although the scale of transfers appears smaller now than in the 1990s, major small arms deals continue to be signed, and the dangers of the illicit trade remain unabated.