

Making the Difference?

WEAPONS COLLECTION AND SMALL ARMS AVAILABILITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF CONGO



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Ninja militia stand guard in downtown Brazzaville.

The Republic of Congo suffered through three horrific wars in the 1990s. The human costs have been far-reaching. Conservative indications are that approximately 10–15,000 deaths were directly attributable to the last war in 1998–1999, though others estimate that the toll was much higher. Small arms availability and misuse were considered by many to be a key reason for the severity and protracted nature of the conflict.

Recognizing the dangers posed by widely available weapons, the government of the Republic of Congo requested support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to collect weapons from the militia groups involved in the latest conflict and to reintegrate the remaining ex-combatants. The project, administered between 2000 and 2002, was considered by many to be a success.

The estimate of the total number of small arms and light weapons in the RoC when fighting ended lies between 67,000 and 80,000. By 2003, collection programmes had recovered about 28 per cent of the total.

But the project suffered from a number of shortcomings. Specifically, there was no awareness of the total number of weapons left in communities, where these arms were coming from and how they were trafficked, or their impacts on the safety of civilians. The UNDP and the IOM were unable to determine how many weapons of the total they had collected, whether they had made any impact on the trade in small arms, or whether the project was improving civilian security. This chapter summarizes the findings of a comprehensive study carried out by the Small Arms Survey for the IOM/UNDP to address these questions.

The study found that:

- There were an estimated 67,000–80,000 small arms and light weapons (excluding grenades and other explosives) in the country when the fighting ended.
- By 2003, the IOM/UNDP and the government had collected 16,000 guns, about 28 per cent of the total.
- Police and military weapons depots were almost entirely emptied over the 1990s. In this way, between 18,000 and 31,000 small arms leaked to the various militias in the country.
- It is estimated that the Cobra militia held approximately 26,000 weapons in 1999, the Ninja fighters approximately 13,000, and the Cocoye militia another 30,000 small arms.

Alleged transfers of small arms arrived from Israel, South Africa, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Gabon, and countries in Eastern Europe. Belligerents acquired an estimated 49,500 weapons between 1993 and 1997. This is a conservative estimate covering only confirmed transfers.



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The Shmel, using fuel-air explosives, poses a significant danger in the RoC, as it continues to circulate after fighting has stopped.



Crewmen of a Russian aircraft, accused of being mercenaries and transporting weapons, are jailed in Pointe Noire.

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Among these shipments were significant quantities of the RPO-A 'Shmel', an extremely lethal hand-held launcher whose projectile uses fuel-air explosive techniques to create a destructive force equivalent to a 122mm artillery shell. This is the first time this weapon has been seen in the possession of a non-state actor.

Although the IOM/UNDP Programme was not a weapons buy-back scheme, it provided an incentive for individuals to acquire weapons in order to qualify for the project.

Weapons are stored close to the most recent fighting—and to the greatest concentration of ex-combatants—in small caches (1–5 weapons) wrapped in cloth and buried in the homes of ex-combatants, medium-sized caches (5–10 weapons) controlled by former militia unit commanders, or large collective holdings of 100–400 weapons, owned by several militia units. The latter holdings (in contrast to the others) are typically well maintained.

Small caches have been typical for the Cobra militia, while the Ninja militia have maintained mainly large caches (as well as some individual holdings). The Cocoye militia falls in between, with no typical cache size; anything from small to quite large caches can be found among them. The main types of weapons observed by the research team included a range of former Soviet-Bloc weapons (predominantly AK-47 assault rifles and SKS rifles), as well as Israeli Galils and South African Vector R4/R5s.

Despite the fact that the Republic of Congo is glutted with weapons, surrounded by unstable countries, and facing endemic corruption, there does not appear to be a thriving weapons market. Only a small-scale covert trade seems to exist. This trade goes mainly from the Republic of Congo to its large neighbour to the southeast—the Democratic Republic of Congo. It goes primarily over the Congo River, and is kept alive by small-time weapons dealers whose activities are not organized or part of larger networks. There remains a strong market for military weapons destined for poaching in the wildlife reserves throughout the Republic of Congo.

Although the IOM/UNDP programme was not a weapons buy-back scheme, by linking reintegration assistance with weapons collection, the programme provided an incentive for individuals to acquire weapons in order to qualify for the project.

In March 2002, renewed fighting broke out in the country, ending only in April 2003. Although it is too early to draw definitive conclusions, it appears that a more far-reaching weapons collection programme in 2000–2002 might have been able to prevent further violence. The current situation appears ripe for a renewed effort in this direction, to increase confidence in the peace process, remove weapons from society, and create greater trust between participants.

Map 8.1 The Republic of Congo

