

## Introduction

Illicit small arms<sup>1</sup> can cause insecurity and instability for populations, governments, and regions alike, whether used in civil disorder, crime or conflict. While it is unlikely that there are large numbers of these weapons currently in the western Pacific, even small numbers of illicit small arms can be seriously destabilising. Small arms are also relatively easy to transfer, use, and hide, making their proliferation, detection and effective control a considerable challenge. This *In Brief* makes some initial observations of illicit small arms movements in the western Pacific, with a particular focus on demand for such weapons. In-country research, for a project funded by the Australian Civil-Military Centre, will be undertaken late 2014 into 2015.

## Illicit Small Arms and Focus Countries

This project investigates illicit small arms in the Pacific, with a particular focus on Papua New Guinea (excluding Bougainville),<sup>2</sup> Solomon Islands, and Fiji. It will identify the main illicit weapons types, the likely sources of these weapons, and, in particular, it will investigate what is driving demand for illicit small arms and light weapons in the Pacific.

Small arms are defined according to the [Small Arms Survey](#) as being: revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, assault rifles, sub-machine guns and light machine guns, including those that are homemade or 'craft-produced'. The term 'weapons' is used to refer to small arms, but the project does not consider other weapons types such as explosives or knives.

The term 'illicit' is used in preference to the term 'illegal', because the latter depends on the national laws of the country the weapon is in, and who is using it. The term 'loose' weapons is also used, as it refers to weapons not under state control.

## Approach

One of the reasons for undertaking the project is the scarcity of recent material on small arms in the Pacific. It is a decade since the last empirical multi-country research was conducted (Alpers and Twyford

2003; Capie 2003). While this small project cannot be comprehensive, it is intended to be a snapshot of key countries and identify current trends. It is based around five themes:

- the dynamics of illicit small arms movements, such as where they are going to and coming from
- weapons numbers, noting that small numbers of small arms can be destabilising, and that numbers are, understandably, estimates
- weapons types, to ascertain likely sources, intent of use, and firepower
- most particularly, the main drivers of demand, such as increased criminality, increased or anticipated civil unrest or armed violence, increased supply, decreased prices, and retention for pre-existing reasons, such as lack of trust
- what the most effective ways of returning loose and illicit weapons to state control might be.

## Demand Reduction

This project posits that small arms control after conflict, civil unrest or disturbance is rarely successful if it only tries to stop weapons getting into undesired hands (control), and after doing so, removes weapons (disarmament). It proposes that more effective small arms control must not be restricted to control and disarmament, but must also address demand reduction.

Demand reduction is about responding to how and why small arms are sought after, obtained, and retained by non-state combatants and armed civilians. This is important because most control and disarmament approaches seek to stop or remove weapons without fully appreciating the demand factors, yet, arguably, demand drives the small arms proliferation dynamic more than supply.

Further, by seeing demand as a dynamic of both tangible and intangible factors, it becomes apparent that tangible factors are insufficient to explain why certain people obtain or retain weapons. Former non-state combatants, for example, are often unwilling to disarm to international or national agencies because they want to keep their firearms for hunting, or as a type of 'insurance' against a new govern-

ment they do not trust. However, intangible factors are important. For such combatants, they include a strong psychological attachment to a weapon that they see as being a comrade, as a central component of what they perceive to be a legitimate struggle, and a tool by which lives they value were saved. In this case, the weapons become iconic. To remove them through buybacks (which often create micro-markets and therefore do not work) or destruction ceremonies does little to appease the combatants' sense of justice and liberation (Koorey 2009).

Field research will be conducted in the three main focus countries of Papua New Guinea (excluding Bougainville), Solomon Islands, and Fiji. These three countries were chosen as they appear to be examples of three different small arms dynamics — criminality, post-conflict, and post-coup.

In Papua New Guinea, small arms are often prevalent during elections. Also, violent crime, including the use of firearms, is said to be increasing (World Bank 2014); this is a useful example of what is mostly a law and order problem.

By comparison, Solomon Islands has just experienced a decade of the Australian-led intervention, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which began in 2003. The mission was aimed at stabilising the country after four years of increased violence and instability brought about by rival armed groups — the country was at the brink of collapse. Part of RAMSI's remit was to remove the weapons used by the armed groups. While many of these arms were sourced from inside the country, including homemade weapons (Alpers and Twyford 2003), there are currently rumours of both trafficking in small arms into Solomon Islands, and increased sophistication of homemade weapons.

After a successful military coup in 2006, Fiji held elections in September 2014. Government-sourced small arms were central in the 2000 coup (Alpers and Twyford 2003). While there do not appear to be significant numbers of loose small arms in Fiji, in this watershed year it is worthwhile assessing if there are drivers of demand in, or sources of supply to, Fiji.

Transnational crime activity in the Pacific, while mostly illicit drugs, is cause for concern in

terms of increased criminal activity and the possible introduction of new, factory-produced, automatic weapons. It is also timely to consider if there is any evidence of brokering or transitting of illicit small arms in the western Pacific.

## Conclusion

Taking a demand-focussed approach to the illicit small arms movements problem should prove instructive in understanding how, why, and if such weapons are being sought after in the western Pacific. In observing and analysing current trends, this project expects to make observations not only of and for this region, but also of relevance further afield.

## Author Notes & Acknowledgement

*Stephanie Koorey is a visiting fellow at the Fragile States Project at UNSW Canberra.*

## Bibliography

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## Endnotes

- 1 'Small arms' are often shortened to the acronym SALW, being small arms and light weapons. This project restricts itself to small arms only because illicit light weapons are unlikely to be significantly prevalent in the focus countries.
- 2 To keep this project manageable in the timeframe allocated, Bougainville was excluded. The author intends to undertake similar research in Bougainville in the future.

