

Forum: Disarmament and International Security Committee

Issue #14-01: Measures to reduce the illicit arms trade in Latin America

Student Officer: Patricio Flores-Bringas

Position: Chair of (DISEC)

Introduction

In an era where guns and firearms play an ever-growing role in the evolution and growth of criminal activities, the violence surrounding them has become an ever-growing concern, specially for nations in Latin America. This region has widespread issues of crime, therefore as the influx of illegal weapons into these countries increases, so do the instances of violent crimes. With Latin America expecting some of its fastest growth in recent years, it is more important than ever to address the issues that may pose a threat to its further development.

One of the problems with solving the issue is that of the origin of the weapons. While Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Argentina make up the largest producers of firearms in Latin America, their contribution to the total number of firearms in Latin America is almost insignificant. Most firearms found in Latin America originate in the United States of America. This has proven to be an issue as most firearms illegally entering Latin America are bought in the United States and then smuggled into other countries. The other main exporter of firearms to Latin America is Russia, however, their contribution in terms of number of weapons being illegally exported into the region is much lesser than that of the United States.

Latin America is a region with historical political instability, most of this taking place in the second half of the twentieth century during the Cold War. Issues on firearms have long been an issue in the region. Perhaps one of the most well-known cases would be that of the Nicaraguan contras which had firearms provided to them by the United States. More recently, violence in the region has grown in the form of gang violence mostly related to drug trafficking.

According to the Igarapé Institute, a think tank based in Brazil, approximately 33% of the world's homicides occur in Latin America. This is an important figure to take into consideration as Latin America's population represents only about 8% of the entire world population. It is also reported that, globally, approximately 35% of all murders are committed with firearms, however, when looking at Latin America and the Caribbean only, this figure rises to a staggering 63%. What this shows is that Latin America is a region with a large threat of violence due to firearms. One of the countries plagued with one of the largest instances of violent crimes is Mexico. During 2017, Mexico reported the second highest homicide rate in the world, only second to Syria, this year being Mexico's most violent year on record. Mexico recorded 29,168 homicides. Another Latin American country facing large numbers of homicides is El Salvador which reported there were around 109 homicides per every 100,000 people, representing the highest homicide rate per capita in the world.

Not all hope is lost however as there are several Latin American countries with improving situations, one such example is Brazil's São Paulo. This area saw a decrease in its homicide rate by around 80% between the years 2000 and 2015. Even though Brazil did see a decreasing homicide rate in its largest cities, trends show that criminal activities shifted to smaller cities. These Latin American countries are at a crossroads in which they can have a better path carved by peace or one riddled with violence. In order to do this, countries must address the source of the weapons causing the violence in these countries and how to eradicate this trend in the illicit arms trade that plagues most Latin American countries.

Definition of Key Terms

Violent Crime

A violent crime is any crime that uses or threatens to use any type of force. These usually fall into four different categories: murder and manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

Illicit Arms

Any type of arms that are obtained through methods that are illegal according to the jurisdiction of a country. The UN has identified six main sources for these: illicit brokering, weapons leftover from conflicts, illicit manufacturing, leakages from police and military stockpiles, smuggling, and theft.

Firearm

A type of portable weapon that is able to shoot out one or more projectiles on a target. Infliction of damage from one of these is usually fatal. Firearms are commonly used to commit a wide variety of violent crimes.

Black Market

Illegal traffic of goods or resources. Traffic of this type is commonly done in order to avoid the government. Due to the nature of these transactions, it is often troublesome for governments to trace the source of these goods or to keep completely reliable estimates on the amount of goods being trafficked.

General Overview

The issue is enshrouded in multiple controversies, the main one being the source of the weapons, seeing as most arms found throughout Latin America are not made within the region. This helps to raise questions on the current political situation and stability of the region in terms of these nations' legitimacy and ability to monitor themselves. Below are some of the more significant events which have helped to shape the situation into its current state.

Contra Affair

In the 1980's, the Reagan administration of the United States of America, decided to intervene in Nicaragua due to the "growing threat of communism" brought along by the Sandinista National Liberation front. The U.S decided to supply local guerilla groups with training and weapons in order for them to stand better chances when faced against the Sandinistas. However, after Nicaragua transitioned into a democratic government, the need to fight with these subsided. The weapons however did not exit the country and most were not

seized by the government. This problem was not only faced by Nicaragua but by El Salvador, which faced a similar situation. These arms were in turn later used for violent crimes. Many of these weapons also reached the black market where they faced spillover into neighbouring countries such as Honduras raising the instances of violent crimes in these as well.

Colombian Guerrillas

Conflict between the Colombian government and armed guerilla groups has shaken Colombia for just over half a century. This conflict has taken a massive death toll on Colombia and has left the country extremely weary of these groups. Originally started as peasant fighter groups fighting against injustice in Colombia. The main two groups that arose from this were the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). These later evolved into factions that carried out illegal activities within the country such as drug trafficking, kidnappings, and vast amounts of arms trafficking. The weapons from the arms traffic were later either sold to other criminal groups such as drug cartels or used for their own personal use in the conflict. At their height in the early 2000's, these groups threatened the stability of the Colombian government. In 2002 Álvaro Uribe was elected as president of Colombia. Uribe led a strong offensive against these groups that left them greatly weakened by the end of his term. After him Juan Manuel Santos was elected as president of Colombia. Santos hosted multiple peace talks with these rebel groups until he was finally successful to reach a peace agreement with the FARC. Under this deal, the FARC would have the right to become a political party as long as they turned their weapons into United Nations authorities. All but a small part of this group agreed and proceeded to turn in their weapons. Peace talks with the ELN have been less successful. These were held with them in 2016 but their failure to release a hostage this same year postponed talks and progress of these seems unlikely.

Mexican drug cartels and arms traffic from the United States

Ever since Mexico's ex-president Felipe Calderon declared a war on the drug cartels plaguing the country, a wave of violence exploded within Mexico. The response from the drug cartels came in the response of more ruthless tactics, many of which involved the use of firearms.

Mexico, however, is not a large arms producing nation, which meant most of these weapons needed to come from alternative sources. At its peak in 2011, Mexican authorities seized 40,996 firearms in a single year. Most of these guns were of the rifle type of weapons, multiple being AK-47s and AR-15s, high-capacity assault rifles capable of dealing high amounts of damage on targets. A report by Mexican authorities that same year revealed that approximately 67.7% of firearms seized in Mexico had their origin in the United States. Another report also revealed that of these weapons coming in illegally into the country, 97.5% of them had made their way into Mexico over land. What this meant was that most of these weapons were being illegally smuggled across the border from the United States. Conflict within Mexico is mostly fuelled due to violence between cartels in territorial disputes. These disputes occur as cartels fight for more access to the market. Most drugs being produced and/or trafficked within Mexico are then taken to the United States and other markets such as Europe.

Brazilian gang related arms

Gangs in Brazil have operated from the country's slums for multiple years. These gangs distribute drugs and disrupt locals. Because of this, Brazil's police and military carry out multiple operations in order to try to counter the growing threat from these gangs. Government involvement however has caused much concern, particularly in Rio where most of these operations take place. Violence between the gangs and police has only increased and gang drug operations do not seem to slow down to any extent. There is also concern over a growing use of heavier caliber firearms. While gangs usually preferred to use smaller handguns or revolvers, with growing government involvement, there is evidence of growing use of rifles by the gangs in order to counter government operations. This has raised the question on the effectiveness of the Brazilian government to stop the illicit arms trade within their country seeing as to how it seems to feed violence within the country.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States of America

As the largest arms manufacturer in the world, the United States of America plays a key

role in the distribution of firearms across the globe. It is reported that most guns found in Latin America have their source in the United States. This country has lenient gun ownership laws which have allowed for the high ownership of firearms in the country. Some of the firearms are legally bought in the United States and eventually flow into the illegal firearm trade, in many cases ending up in Latin American countries. Many guns currently found in the illegal arms market have their origin in some Central American civil wars in which the United States would give friendly governments or rebel groups firearms.

Colombia

With ongoing conflicts in the country and a renowned black market rooted into it, Colombia serves as a primary participant in the illicit arms trade. Several leftist guerrilla organizations such as the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) are responsible for the high activity of small-arms within the country. Even though the violence with the guerillas has decreased with the signing of the FARC peace deal, many of the firearms from the conflict still flow into the market and are used to commit crimes throughout the country.

Brazil

A country riddled with gang violence especially due to drug trafficking. Brazil is the largest producer of firearms in Latin America and also one of the countries with the highest homicide rates due to gun violence.

Mexico

The country with the highest firearm related homicide rate. Mexico is a country in an ongoing struggle fighting against drug cartels which hold vast amounts of firearms. These groups are also responsible for most of the violence in the country. Mexico also has a high crime rate with many of these smaller crimes being carried out with firearms. Most illicit firearms found in Mexico fall under the rifle class of guns. These types of guns are usually used for big conflicts such as fights between drug cartels and the Mexican army.

Nicaragua

During the war between the Contras and the Sandinistas, many guns found their way to Nicaragua. Many of these guns can still be found today and have filtered their way in to other countries such as Mexico and Brazil. While Nicaragua itself has a decreasing crime rate and homicide rate, the presence of many of these firearms is still a threat to international security.

El Salvador

Similarly to Nicaragua, most of the guns present in El Salvador found their way into the country during its civil war in the 1980's. El Salvador also reports the highest homicide rate per capita with most of these being carried out with firearms.

Russia

As the second largest exporter of guns to the region, Russia plays an important role in the distribution of firearms in Latin America. Some guns of Russian origin find their traces to the Cold War era in which they made their way in to support friendly rebel groups or governments. Many of these weapons are still found across the region and used to this day.

Timeline

1364	First recorded use of a firearm.
1835	Samuel Colt produces the first commercially successful mass-produced firearm.
1981	The Reagan administration makes an agreement with the Nicaraguan Contras to provide them firearms to fight against the Sandinistas.
1991	Medellin Colombia sees a rise in homicides to around 266 per 100,000 marking the highest homicide rate at the time.
2010	Ciudad Juarez in Mexico reaches the highest ever recorded homicide rate in a

city (276 per 100,000). Most of these homicides were from victims of drug cartel related violence with a vast majority of these homicides being carried out with a firearm.

June 2017 The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) turn in around 7000 firearms to the Colombian government as part of the peace deal. Small numbers of firearms still remain unaccounted for.

2017 Mexico has its highest ever recorded homicide rate.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

In the past, the United Nations had been actively involved in trying to resolve the issue. In terms of their success, however, there is not much data to show that significant progress has been made towards solving the issue. Multiple mechanisms have been tried to be established such as arms embargoes on certain countries and the International Small Arms Control Standards (ISACS). The UN has also made multiple attempts to establish cooperation between nations in the tracing of weapons. Most progress however made on this issue has mostly been done in Africa as it had been the UN's largest area of concern. Recently however, the UN has just started once again heeding the issue. Their main concern has been on the human cost of the trafficking of illicit arms

- In 2006 the United Nations held the small arms review conference in which they created the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects. **(A/CONF.192/15)**
- Security Council resolution stressing the importance of arms embargoes on certain countries. Resolution was successfully passed yet many of the arms embargoes were never properly implemented on some of the countries set to have embargoes. **(S/RES/1196)**

- General Assembly resolution calling for the creation of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Created with the purpose of “establishing common international standards for the import, export and transfer of conventional arms”. (A/RES/61/89)

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The UN's main way of addressing issues regarding disarmament has been through ISACS. However, this does not mean it has been successful at reaching its goal. The program sets the standards and teaches countries how to use it in order to control the flow of arms. Yet, in many occasions nations are still not able to properly enforce the standards by which ISACS abides. What this means is that while the UN has attempted to address the issue, they have not been particularly successful at achieving their goals. If the ISACS methods were properly enforced then it would be likely that the flow of these illicit arms would be greatly reduced as the guidelines set in ISACS have multiple methods including those for weapons tracing which have shown to be effective when trying to restrict the flow of arms. One of the few instances in which this mechanism was used was the disarmament of the FARC in Colombia. In this instance, proper implementation of this method showed the great potential that it has when used correctly. Governments find trouble in its implementation in many cases due to the high technical level of its implementation. Even though the UN holds meetings on how to properly implement these standards, many nations do not follow the training that they receive instead opting for different methods. In cases when standards other than ISACS were set, nations were not as successful in disrupting the arms trade as in other instances when it was done through the proper UN methods.

Possible Solutions

Seeing as the illicit arms trade is a major cause of violence within multiple countries in Latin America, it is an issue that requires solutions as fast as possible. However, in order to solve this issue, multiple aspects need to be taken into consideration. One of these is cooperation between nations. Without cooperation between different nations, this issue might prove too big for a single country to solve on its own. In order to do this, countries must agree on a protocol as on how to disarm conflicts in their countries and establishment of common practices between

them in order for disarmament to be done more efficiently. Another important aspect to take into consideration is the disruption of the black market on arms. There are multiple possible actions governments may be able to take in order to disrupt the trade.

One of these methods would be to keep closer records on ownership of guns within a country. Countries could also establish agreements in order to prevent the arms trade across their borders. Other nations may potentially be able to aid others in solving internal conflicts. A good model of this is the FARC peace talks which were greatly aided by other countries such as Cuba. Also, given as multiple UN guidelines on disarmament already exist, the main problem lies in the enforcement of these. If nations are able to find ways to more efficiently implement these, then the illicit arms trade would be greatly slowed down. Nations should also be conscious of their own weapons supplies as improper monitoring of these often has them falling into the hands of their illicit trade.

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Appendix or Appendices

- I. UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects

<https://www.un.org/events/smallarms2006/pdf/PoA.pdf>

- II. Country factsheets on arms seizures and trafficking

http://www.unodc.org/documents/firearms-protocol/Country_Factsheet_WEB.pdf

- III. Igarapé Institute Homicide Monitor

<http://homicide.igarape.org.br/>