

as not to create room for excuses for people to resort to arms as a way to settle scores.

The Electoral Commission must ensure free fair and transparent elections. The professional conduct of officers or agents of the Electoral Commission is important so as not to compromise their independence and neutrality in the polls. Voters and supporters of political parties must be adequately informed about the voting process and dispute resolution mechanisms so that in the event of disagreements they will resort to the due process in seeking redress.

Politicians and their supporters must act responsibly and avoid hate speeches and the exploitation of ethnic and economic sentiments that have the tendency to incite violence. No country can be governed in chaos hence it is important that politicians who seek the mandate of the electorate to lead to do so responsibly.

Civil society organisations have critical roles to play in ensuring peaceful elections. They can embark on voter education and peace-building initiatives in the various constituencies.

Citizens must be vigilant and report incidents of arms trafficking to the appropriate security agencies for the necessary actions to be taken. Already, the police through their own intelligence and information from patriotic citizens have impounded illicit arms traffickers. These traffickers must be prosecuted to serve as a deterrent to others.

When all stakeholders play their roles effectively, there will be little room for individuals to make excuses and take up arms against one another before, during and after the elections.



## SMALL ARMS AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE – AVOIDING THE CANKER IN GHANA

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### INTRODUCTION

People's sensitivity to electoral outcomes is one of the biggest triggers of armed conflict in many countries in Africa. Indeed, some of the worst moments of tension in Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Kenya, Zimbabwe and many other nations that have witnessed armed conflict have been elections-related when existing social crevices are widened into political cracks with looming prospects of national collapse. The recent political crisis in Cote d'Ivoire -Ghana's western neighbour provides a reminder that an election is a tight-rope walk – the least slip may result in chaos. In many of these conflicts, small arms remain the key instruments used to unleash violence on innocent people destroying thousands of lives and property, displacing millions of people and leading to the total breakdown of modest social, political and economic gains of those nations. This paper discusses the nexus between illicit small arms proliferation and election violence and how Ghana can work to avoid the canker that has plagued other African countries.

### GHANA'S SMALL ARMS SITUATION

The use of small arms predates colonial rule where there were inter-tribal wars. Subsequently, guns played important roles in traditional ceremonies such as festivals, installation of chiefs and funerals of important personalities. Undeniably, almost every traditional area led by a chief has an armoury. Besides, existing chieftaincy, land and other resource related disputes serve as sources of demand for small arms. Whereas individuals who feel insecure acquire arms illegally for self-protection, unscrupulous persons also acquire small arms for criminal activities.

Sources of illegal small arms and light weapons include purchases from international and national arms dealers, pilfering from security agencies<sup>1</sup>, and purchases of locally-produced craft weapons. Other sources of illegal small arms in circulation include: theft from residences, seizures from security officials during robberies and in clashes with other armed groups. Some Ghanaians who live abroad also smuggle guns by shipping them together with their personal effects and fail to register them.

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A baseline assessment of illicit small arms in Ghana conducted in 2004 by the United Nations Development Programme and the Government of Ghana estimated that there are at least 220,000 small arms in civilian hands in Ghana. Out of this number only about 95,000 representing 43.2% are registered leaving a significant 125,000 representing 56.8% illicit guns in circulation unaccounted for. Again, the survey indicates that about 34% of the illicit guns in circulation as at 2004 are illegally manufactured locally. The above statistics suggest that about 66% of illicit small arms in circulation might have been illegally trafficked into the country<sup>2</sup>.

Ghana has a number of laws in place to control illicit proliferation of small arms. It is also a signatory to many international protocols and instruments such as the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms. The Arms and Ammunitions Act, 1962 (Act 118) prohibits the manufacture and the assembling of firearms, arms of war, munitions of war or ammunitions except at arsenals established by government. The act also provides for the possibility of civilian ownership of single and double barrelled shot guns, single and double barrelled garden guns, pump action shotguns, pistols, rifles, air pistols and revolvers upon application to the Minister of the Interior, subject to certain qualifications. The Arms and Ammunitions Decree of 1972 was an expansion of the Arms and Ammunitions Act, 1962. It elaborates further on the processes involved in the registration of firearms, including renewal methods and periods. It also prohibits the production of arms but makes provision for persons interested in the production of arms to apply to the government for a license to do so even though no such license has ever been granted.

In spite of the above legal and regulatory regime, Ghana's gun-related laws are blatantly flouted due to ineffective monitoring mechanisms. The National Commission on Small Arms (NACSA) in collaboration with other agencies and its partners has undertaken

several activities including the development of a national plan of action on small arms control. The plan has five key strategic thrusts namely: Public Education and Sensitisation, Stockpile and Inventory Management, Border Control Management, Small Arms Control (policy, legislation, infrastructure and capacity) and Alternative Livelihood.

In that regard, NACSA has embarked on and continues to implement various programmes and activities. The Commission has undertaken several community sensitisation programmes including collection of confiscated weapons for destruction and educating the general public on the dangers associated with the abuse of small arms. It has also facilitated training programmes for journalists on reporting on small arms-related issues. The Commission has facilitated training for officers of the Ghana Immigration Service, Customs Excise and Preventive Service as well as the Ghana Police Service on border control and management with respect to small arms control. Considering the important role stockpile and inventory management play in small arms and light weapons (SALW) management, the Commission has facilitated the acquisition of weapon marking machines to mark all weapons in the custody of the security agencies. It has also trained personnel of the security agencies on weapons marking and tracing to help fulfill Ghana's obligations under the ECOWAS Convention on inventory management and marking and tracing.

The Commission has also facilitated the formation of blacksmiths associations across the country as a strategy of mobilising, monitoring and discouraging the illegal manufacture of artisanal weapons. In the long term, the Commission intends to mobilise resources and provide support to blacksmiths to produce peaceful implements through alternative livelihood projects or systems.

Currently, the Commission is in the process of reviewing all small arms-related laws to recommend the necessary amendments to government to address the current challenges in small arms control.

## IMPACT OF SMALL ARMS ON ELECTIONS

West Africa has witnessed prolonged armed conflict over the last two decades; and as a result, the region has a heavy concentration of illicit small arms in circulation. There are an estimated seven to ten million illicit small arms and light weapons in circulation in West Africa<sup>3</sup>. Small arms circulate within the sub region through porous international borders and are used to facilitate criminal activities such as robbery, causing harm to innocent civilians, money laundering and drug trafficking. In many countries like Ghana, the local production of arms is a domestic source of illicit arms in circulation.

The abuse of small arms in elections has far reaching implications for the nation. It has the potential of undermining the credibility of the elections and tottering efforts aimed at democratic consolidation. Arguably, the post-election violence in the Republic of Congo (Congo Brazzaville) in 1993 laid the foundation for the civil war in 1997<sup>4</sup>.

Small arms may be used throughout the election cycle - before, during and after elections. Activities before elections such as voter registration and compilation of a credible voters' register are affected by the abuse of small arms. Unscrupulous persons intimidate prospective voters with small arms during voter registration; hence prospective voters for fear fail to turn up for registration. Supporters of political parties tend to arm themselves against one another as a response to the suspicion that their opponents may be armed and violent. Small arms are used to disrupt political party activities such as electioneering campaigns. These developments cause some candidates to withdraw from the race or call for the postponement or even cancellation of elections.

In the same vein, voters are discouraged from voting on election day due to the fear created by the threat of violence from small arms abuse. In the past there have been reports about armed men moving from one polling station to another to hijack ballot papers in an attempt to rig elections.

When elections results are declared, such violence serves as a basis for refusal to accept the outcome of the elections. Sometimes, supporters of political parties resort to the use of small arms to protest against their dissatisfaction against the outcome of the votes – a development that resulted in a full blown armed conflict in Cote d'Ivoire.

Even though Ghana has not regressed into armed electoral violence, there have been reported incidents of isolated armed violence at certain flashpoints in the past. The by-elections in the Chereponi, Atiwa and Akwatia constituencies are cases in point. During the tensed days in the aftermath to the run-off elections in the 2008 elections in Ghana, there were reports of a crowd armed with machetes and other implements, who marched to the premises of the Electoral Commission to protest against suspicions of vote-rigging.

The 2012 biometric voter registration witnessed about seven gun-related incidents at polling stations and communities some of which temporarily disrupted the registration exercise.

These are indications that people may choose to express their frustration, suspicion and dissatisfaction with the outcome of the elections by resorting to the use of arms as it happened in Cote d'Ivoire in 2010. A certain imperative therefore exists to undertake activities to ensure gun violence free elections.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Ensuring peaceful and armed violence free elections is a collective responsibility of state institutions involved, civil society organisations and citizens. While the security agencies and the National Commission on Small Arms work to control the illicit proliferation of small arms and their effect on elections and sensitise the public on the dangers involved, it is important that all stakeholders execute their duties diligently so

<sup>2</sup>Illicit Small Arms in Ghana - A Baseline Assessment, UNDP and Government of Ghana, 2004

<sup>3</sup>Small Arms, Armed Violence, and Insecurity in Nigeria: The Niger Delta in Perspective, Small Arms Survey, 2007

<sup>4</sup>Trends in Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa, United States Institute for Peace, 2010