

## Chapter 3

# Why act now?



Young boy with toy machine gun picks his way through the rubble of his neighbourhood in Shanghai which is being cleared to make way for modern skyscrapers.

### 3: Why act now?

*‘The price has dropped.  
It used to be six cows for  
one AK. Now you can  
get a new gun for one bull  
and six goats.’*

Charles Logwe, former gun-trader in  
northern Uganda, 2001<sup>151</sup>

The situation is critical.

1. The ‘war on terror’ has fundamentally shifted some governments’ policies. More arms are being exported with little regard for the recipient countries’ track record on human rights and humanitarian law, and to countries with whom alliances have been formed purely on the basis of the existence of a common enemy.
2. Civilian casualties are increasingly severe, and modern weapons exacerbate this trend.
3. Weapons possession is becoming more widespread and destructive in many societies.
  - ▶ Guns are bound up in notions of masculinity, disadvantaging women, militarising communities, and exacerbating cultures of violence.
  - ▶ Violence escalates as more people own guns, and traditional controls break down.
  - ▶ The effects of armed organised crime, particularly relating to drugs, are similar to those resulting from war. Children’s lives are shattered.
4. The supply of arms is becoming even more out of control – see Chapter Four.

Neither the misuse of arms nor armed conflict is new. In various forms they have both been in existence for millennia, so why the call to action now? The fact is that the global abuse of arms has reached a critical point. Small arms, the ‘weapons of mass destruction’ that are used every day, are being overlooked. The ‘war on terror’ has ironically fuelled the proliferation of weapons. In addition, government forces and armed groups who have easy access to weapons and a disregard for human life are increasingly targeting civilians. All this is happening in a context of societal change, where guns play an ever-increasing role in the lives of people in countries around the world.

## The ‘war on terror’

Most governments have identified international ‘terrorism’ and weapons of mass destruction as grave threats which must be tackled. These can be effectively addressed only in accordance with international law. The fight against them must not be conducted at the expense of a wider campaign for peace and justice.

At a time when ‘fighting terrorism’ has been allowed to dominate the international agenda, one would expect that there would be a rekindled interest in arms controls and renewed efforts to prevent arms reaching those who commit abuses. Yet the reverse has occurred.

European countries, and others, claim to base their arms-export criteria on respect for human rights; the USA has a specific law – known as the Leahy Amendments – to ban military aid and training to particular units of foreign security forces that commit human rights abuses.<sup>153</sup> Yet these principles are being swept aside in the fight against ‘terrorism’.

The world’s most economically powerful states constitute the Group of Eight (G8): Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Russian Federation, the UK, and the USA. In June 2002, the G8 allocated US\$ 20 billion and agreed a ‘global partnership’ to prevent terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction. But the G8 failed to address the proliferation of conventional weapons, including small arms, to states and armed groups that they know will abuse such weapons to terrorise civilian populations.

Indeed, the UK, USA, France, Germany, Canada, and Italy have approved enormous arms supplies to Saudi Arabia, knowing that the authorities there do not permit any criticism of the state, that all parties or political organisations in Saudi Arabia are illegal, and that thousands of political or religious detainees have been arbitrarily detained over the years.<sup>154</sup>

In the wake of the attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001, the US government has massively increased its military aid to dozens of countries. Some of the recipients of this aid are armed forces which have committed grave violations of human rights and have been identified in the State Department’s own human rights report as having a ‘poor’ human rights record, or worse. Recipient countries include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Colombia, Georgia, Israel, Nepal, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Yemen. In the cases of Azerbaijan, India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Yugoslavia, sanctions were lifted. In some other countries, restrictions had to be relaxed.

*‘America encourages and expects governments everywhere to help remove the terrorist parasites that threaten their own countries and peace in the world... If governments need training or resources to meet this commitment, America will help.’*

US President George W. Bush, 2002<sup>152</sup>

In the year following the 11 September attacks, security assistance and related aid from the USA to Uzbekistan increased by US\$ 45 million.<sup>155</sup> In Pakistan, it soared from US\$ 3.5 million to US\$ 1.3 billion. Meanwhile systematic violations of human rights – including torture, deaths in custody, and extra-judicial killings – by members of the security and paramilitary forces in those countries continue. In March 2002 the US Administration introduced an emergency supplemental defence authorisation bill which sought to lift restrictions on Indonesia and Colombia, despite reports of continuing human rights abuses there.<sup>156</sup>

### Stoking the fires of conflict in Colombia

In 2000, the US government approved Plan Colombia: a massive programme of military aid, totalling more than US\$ 1.3 bn, most of it destined for the Colombian army, despite the army's poor human rights record and continuing international concern over links between the security forces and paramilitary groups.<sup>158</sup>

Despite a catalogue of evidence that

weapons are used for serious human rights violations, the US Administration has extended Colombia's eligibility for military and police training, and gained Congressional support for direct military aid for Colombia's operations against armed rebels, shifting the focus from 'counter-narcotics' to 'counter-terrorism' and enabling the supply of even more weapons.<sup>159</sup>

Close US allies, such as the UK government, appeared to follow suit. The value of British arms cleared for export to Indonesia rose from £2m in 2000 to over £40m in 2002, a 20-fold increase.<sup>157</sup>

The gross abuses of human rights that armed forces allied to the 'war on terror' inflict on civilian populations are given little attention. Arms and military assistance are being offered as a geopolitical inducement, with few, if any, conditions to protect human rights.<sup>160</sup> Indeed, the USA did not investigate or act when its Afghan allies, the Northern Alliance, were implicated in war crimes when their Taliban captives suffocated in sealed transport containers in Kunduz.<sup>161</sup> This sends a message that human rights are secondary in the fight against 'terrorism'. In the case of Uzbekistan, steps were taken to increase the monitoring of human rights, and Congress requires reports of the use to which Uzbek units put US support. However, according to Human Rights Watch, the State Department has since 'exaggerated the human rights gains, in order to maintain foreign assistance', thereby undermining the initiative and reinforcing the message that human rights are negotiable.<sup>162</sup>

## Excuses for arms abuses

The unlikely alliances formed by the US government under President George W. Bush have been based on the false logic of ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’. This crude policy does not begin to take into account the long life-cycles of most weapon systems, and the need for a very careful assessment of the likely ability of armed forces to uphold the rule of law. Yet on this basis, US arms sales to Iraq’s neighbours were increased in the build-up to the war in Iraq, and major deals, including some long-stalled, moved forward.<sup>164</sup>

Major arms manufacturing and exporting powers belonging to the G8, as well as China, have played a key role in supplying weapons, directly or indirectly, to regimes which pay only lip service to human rights and international law. Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 with weapons bought from all major arms powers.<sup>165</sup> During the Iraq–Iran war in the 1980s, the US government supplied the Iraqis with military intelligence and advice; it also ensured that Iraq had military weaponry, and in one instance it used a Chilean company to supply cluster bombs. Diplomatic relations between Iraq and the USA were reinstated, despite the ‘almost daily use of chemical weapons’ at that time.<sup>166</sup>

Forging and funding military allegiances purely on the basis of a common enemy and without respect for human rights can result in the opposite of what was intended. Since the 1980s, the US administration has provided vast shipments of arms and military assistance to government and armed opposition groups in Afghanistan, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, and Somalia; in all of these countries, armed forces were committing gross violations of human rights while receiving US military aid, and all of them were later accused by US governments of ‘harbouring terrorists’, or the armed forces concerned were accused by the USA of being ‘terrorists’. Years later in Afghanistan and Somalia, the arms received and the techniques learned were used against US armed forces – a phenomenon known as ‘blowback’. US forces were attacked with Stinger missile systems in Afghanistan in 2001, which had previously been supplied by the US Central Intelligence Agency to the Afghan Mujahideen forces fighting the Soviet army in the 1980s.<sup>167</sup>

The supply of arms in situations like these stores up problems for the future – creating regional arms races, providing a source of arms for possible diversion to armed groups, and weakening international standards on human rights. The provision of arms must be made dependent on established and unwavering factors, such as strict institutionalised compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law, and it must be separated from short-sighted foreign policy which does not take these longer-term issues into account.

*‘Fast changes are taking place around the world, especially since September 11, and many countries are reassessing the military balance of powers around them and feel the need to upgrade their systems.’*

Major General Avraham Rotem, Israeli defence expert, 2003<sup>163</sup>

*‘They say they are looking for the rebels, but it’s the people that always end up becoming the targets.’*

26-year-old student, Aceh, Indonesia, 2003<sup>168</sup>

## The civilian toll keeps rising

The direct and indirect impacts of war and violence have already reached a critical point and will become even more significant over the next 20 years, imposing an intolerable burden on poor communities. By 2020, the numbers of deaths and injuries from war and violence will overtake the numbers of deaths caused by killer diseases such as measles and malaria, without concerted action now to reverse current trends.<sup>169</sup>

Most wars today are fought *within* nations. Conflicts often involve several different armed forces, sometimes divided along ethnic lines. They usually involve irregular forces fighting in civilian areas. The civilian casualty figures show the impact of these trends. Best estimates are that 14 per cent of total casualties were civilians in the First World War. This increased to 67 per cent in the Second World War, and has grown even higher in many of today’s wars.<sup>171</sup>

For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Colombia the distinction between civilians and combatants is often blurred by the actions of government and illegal armed actors alike. Civilians are used as a cover for military and paramilitary operations, as a shield against air or artillery attacks, and as providers of subsistence, shelter, and sexual gratification – mostly at the point of a gun. They are then attacked in reprisal killings and suffer the denial of material aid. Combatants tend to use civilian infrastructure, telecommunications, and logistics for military purposes – making the distinction between military and civilian targets very difficult.

### ‘Conflict diamonds’ and arms trafficking to Africa

The diamonds-for-arms trade in Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo involves complex networks of aviation businesses, arms merchants, and shipping agents. According to UN investigations in 2000 and 2001, two of the key traffickers were Victor Bout, a Russian businessman then based in the United Arab Emirates, and Sanjivan Ruprah, a Kenyan national based in Liberia.<sup>172</sup> One shipment in November 2000 consisted of Slovakian-made sub-machine guns which were officially destined for Guinea; but the aeroplane transporting them –

an Ilyushin controlled by Victor Bout – travelled instead to Liberia.<sup>173</sup> On its way back, the plane stopped over in Kisangani, where Sanjivan Ruprah had been granted a 4,000 km<sup>2</sup> diamond concession by the DRC authorities.<sup>174</sup> The plane also picked up sub-machine guns in Uganda destined for Liberia in a deal involving Sanjivan Ruprah.<sup>175</sup> He has attempted to sell his diamonds in Belgium, where he was arrested in February 2002 by the Belgian authorities for counterfeiting and using a false passport.<sup>176</sup>

*‘It is those that have weapons of war who continue to hold the people of Somalia hostage to the cycle of violence.’*

UN Security Council President, Guinean Ambassador Mamady Traoré, March 2003<sup>170</sup>

## Deadly privatisation of conflict

In civil wars, the forces involved are increasingly turning to plunder of natural resources and extortion from civilians to fund the conflict or, indeed, as a primary purpose for the continuation of conflict. Armed forces feed off civilians, using terrible violence and threats, forcing communities to provide shelter, food, money, recruits, and sexual services.

Diamonds in Angola and Sierra Leone; oil in Sudan and Angola; copper in Papua New Guinea; timber in Cambodia and Liberia; coltan, gold, and other minerals in the Democratic Republic of Congo: these resources are exploited and traded by governments and local military commanders in exchange for military supplies and personal financial gain. A desperate government will sometimes mortgage its country's future stores of precious natural resources in order to raise immediate finance to obtain weapons and ammunition. In Rwanda before the genocide, the tea plantations were mortgaged for the purchase of arms from Egypt.<sup>178</sup> In the Republic of Congo, prior to the massacres in Brazzaville in 1997, future oil production was sold to obtain arms.<sup>179</sup>

In about a quarter of the over 40 armed conflicts around the world in 2001, control of natural resources played a significant role, generating at least US\$ 12 bn a year.<sup>180</sup>

In these situations, economic power and armed power go hand in hand, with one reinforcing the other, leaving those in control of the exploitation largely above the law.

Reports by the UN Panel of Experts on Liberia, which monitors compliance with the UN arms embargo, have identified the role of timber exports in funding this tragic war, in which both sides have abused the human rights of civilians. In addition, timber companies are reported to have facilitated transfers of weapons.<sup>181</sup>

In many of these wars, the capacity to influence belligerents is severely limited. As they develop independent means of financing, and break free from the foreign ideological control that characterised the Cold War era, they care less what outsiders think or say, and feel free to commit grave breaches of international human rights and humanitarian law with impunity. Cutting the source of the weaponry and/or ending the trade in resources is one of the only ways to influence their behaviour.

*'Our diamonds are being exchanged for guns, and they are coming in through the back way. If I had the power, no one would ever trade in arms in my country, because I have seen war. I appeal to the people who sell arms to our brothers to destroy us, to stop doing it.'*

Chief Mohammed Koroma, Boajibu, Sierra Leone, 2001<sup>177</sup>

## Private military companies

Private military companies contracted to undertake direct military services on behalf of governments or opposition forces play a critical and increasing role in the provision of arms and support to regimes around the world. Private companies are often ideally placed to import weapons, with links to governments, arms brokers, air cargo companies, and arms manufacturers. One company supplied weapons to both sides in the Sierra Leone conflict.<sup>182</sup> The number and influence of private companies are increasing, and many believe that the 'war on terror' will only accelerate this trend. In recent years, the US government has

frequently hired or authorised private military consultants to train foreign police forces and military troops. According to a detailed study, US companies trained military forces in more than 24 countries during the 1990s, including Angola, Bolivia, Bosnia, Colombia, Croatia, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Haiti, Kosovo, Liberia, Nigeria, Peru, Rwanda, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>183</sup> The US government has not taken adequate steps to ensure that where such training is given, especially in the use of arms, the training courses promote strict adherence to international human rights and humanitarian law.<sup>184</sup>

*'We do not have any toys to play with... so we make a gun out of some sticks... and that is how we play. I can dismantle my father's T56. Sometimes my father tells me to clean his gun. Now I am quite skilled at dismantling and re-assembling the gun... My main ambition is to join the army...'*

Sri Lankan child, 1998<sup>185</sup>

## Guns in society – spiralling out of control

The culture of armed violence is becoming all-pervasive in peace time as well as at times of conflict. It is a matter of debate to decide which came first, the gun or the culture of violence, but it is clear that they are mutually reinforcing. In cultures where carrying weapons is traditional, men have replaced traditional weapons, such as bows and arrows, with guns; men in other cultures are newly adopting weapons. In both cases there is a prospect of an alarming escalation of violence. Can men live without the gun? Do they want to?

### Men, women, and guns

The power of guns is inextricably linked with the notion of masculinity in both industrialised and traditional cultures. Most weapons are owned and used by men; in the USA only nine per cent of women own guns, as opposed to 42 per cent of men, while in Canada 85 per cent of gun owners are men.<sup>186</sup> Most armed forces do not include women (although the Eritrean army and the Tamil Tigers are renowned for their recruitment of women), and often women are excluded from firearms duties in the security services.

Conventional notions of masculinity ascribe the role of protector and defender to men, and in many cultures this role has become symbolised by the possession of a gun. Gun ownership has become a symbol of masculine power and status, with a hint of glamour, attractive to both women and men. For example, in Brazil the expression ‘Maria AK-47’ is commonly used to describe women who are attracted to men because of the guns they carry, in a twist to the expression ‘Maria gasoline’, which refers to women who choose men based on their cars.<sup>188</sup>

In traditionally armed cultures – including, for example, areas of Albania, Afghanistan, Uganda, and Somalia – the gun becomes an extension of the male self. Kalashnikovs are to Yemeni tribesmen ‘what baseball caps are to Americans’.<sup>189</sup>

Guns may become an integral part of boys’ lives in such cultures:

- ▶ At the birth of a boy, guns are fired joyfully into the air, and people exclaim, ‘We have increased by one gun!’<sup>190</sup>
- ▶ When a boy receives his first gun, he becomes a man: at the Acholi coming-of-age ceremony in Uganda, ashes are rubbed on the boy’s body, and everyone blesses the gun.<sup>191</sup>
- ▶ Boys have been dropping out of school in northern Kenya to become *moran* (warriors).<sup>192</sup>
- ▶ In Somalia, arms are so central that parents have named male infants ‘Uzi’ or ‘AK’.<sup>193</sup>

Where guns are perceived as glamorous and exciting and bestow high status upon the bearer, it is not surprising that children absorb this. According to a former youth worker in north London, ‘Children come out of school talking about guns. The mentality is so much more vicious now. They don’t talk about beating each other up. They talk about killing each other. The simple fact is that with a gun, you are someone, you can hold your own. Without one, you are a dead man.’

The power of guns is both symbolic and actual: they need not always be used to have impact. The ownership and use of arms reinforce existing gender inequalities, strengthening the dominant position of men, maintaining women’s subordination through violence and the threat of violence. Women can be perceived as objects, attainable to those with guns, because guns bestow power, and power grants access to the most beautiful women, also symbols of power.<sup>194</sup>

Male violence against women and girls is often reinforced by cultures of weaponry: guns become an extension of male physical power, facilitating and exacerbating domestic and sexual violence, and coercion. Violent disputes in the home often become more lethal to women and girls when men have guns.

*‘The men who shot these girls consider themselves outside the law. They carry guns as male jewellery – to be ‘gangstas’ – and eventually they will use them. Unless we find a way to make them feel included, they will continue to kill and maim – because they have no value system other than brand names.’*

University worker in Birmingham, UK, after the killing of two girls, January 2003<sup>197</sup>

*‘The women hide the small arms from teenagers and their husbands; the women are trying to convince the children that arms are dangerous.’*

Fatuma Omar, Somaliland, 2001<sup>196</sup>

While boys interviewed in South Africa felt that girls prefer men who have guns, girls in the same community said that boys used guns to coerce them into sexual relations.<sup>195</sup>

Reducing the influence and availability of weapons is one key factor in tackling domestic violence and ensuring women’s fundamental right to personal security.

### **Kids using guns**

Children<sup>198</sup> belonging to armed gangs and combat forces have their childhoods destroyed; they are often traumatised, unprepared and unsuited for a ‘normal’ life. Once they grow up, finding a job, forming a family, and finding a stable place in society can be extremely difficult. Young people are particularly vulnerable, because they may have known no other way of life than a gun culture; they have no other social construct as a frame of reference and hence can less easily avoid being absorbed into it. They find themselves alienated from society, ill-equipped to restart their lives, but they can always resort to the way of life that they know best – violence.

One of the reasons why so many children are involved in armed conflict and armed crime is the simplicity and ease of use of small arms and light weapons: semi-automatic rifles are now light enough and simple enough to be stripped, reassembled, and used by a child of 10.

- ▶ It is estimated that 300,000 children are working as soldiers in conflicts all around the world, in official armed forces and armed opposition groups, with the highest numbers in Africa and Asia. Myanmar (Burma) is believed to have the largest number of child soldiers in the world, with as many as 70,000 boys serving in the national army.<sup>199</sup>
- ▶ Many thousands more belong to criminal armed gangs, where conditions can be surprisingly similar. According to some estimates, at least 25,000 children belong to gangs in El Salvador,<sup>200</sup> and between 5,000 and 6,000 children carry weapons in Rio city, Brazil, alone.<sup>201</sup> According to the PanAmerican Health Organisation, only 25 per cent of children in gangs have completed elementary school.<sup>202</sup>

*‘I want to get the bad, bad things out of my heart. I want to go back to school. I want to be born again as a child.’*

Solomon, aged 16, Liberia<sup>197</sup>

## Weapons in more hands

Gun ownership and the culture of violence is significant in post-conflict societies where violence has become legitimised, and in urban settings where more and more criminals, gangs, and private security forces are armed, increasing the pressure on private individuals to acquire arms for their own protection. The media must share some of the responsibility: both for glorifying guns and sometimes for exaggerating the dangers and exacerbating fear.<sup>205</sup>

Civilian ownership of arms, legal or illegal under national laws, is rising in many places, with China and South Asia becoming major centres of arms ownership.<sup>206</sup> Some countries, such as the UK and Australia, have tightened their gun laws after specific incidents of gun-related violence, but increased incidents of armed crime suggest that illegal ownership has been little affected.

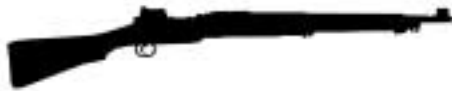
Guns can become so central to communities that their role goes far beyond their original purpose. In South Africa, AK-47s were used as currency and described as ‘Soweto Black Cheques’; in Georgia, arms were a more stable medium of exchange than roubles in the early 1990s: one English teacher was paid in grenades for lessons provided to an elderly woman.<sup>207</sup>

**Guns in official hands are easily outnumbered by those in civilian possession.<sup>203</sup>**

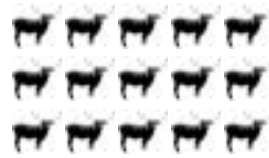
*‘In my village, every man has a gun, a gun of his own. Now, if you don’t have one for yourself then, “Yu nogat nem” – you don’t have a name in the village. Your wife can be raped. They can steal. They can do anything to you.’*

Francis Danga, Papua New Guinea, 2000<sup>204</sup>

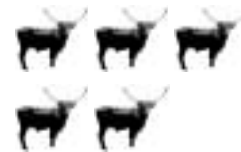
**1967**



**1986**



**2001**



### Increasing availability reduces arms prices in Kenya

According to Joshua Katta, a Pokot chief in Kolowa, Kenya.

Source: Karl Vick, ‘Small arms global reach uproots tribal traditions’, *Washington Post*, 8 July 2001.

*‘Give everything to your friend, except your car, your wife, and your gun.’*

Iraqi saying, reported by journalists in Iraq, 2003<sup>208</sup>

*‘The problem of small arms was not an issue before, and there was raiding but never killing. But when people have guns, an arms race develops as a show of power. As the next community acquire guns, so do they.’*

Francis Komen, Deputy District Commissioner in Isiolo, northern Kenya, 2002<sup>209</sup>

## Escalating violence in pastoralist areas

Fundamental changes in the traditional way of life in pastoralist communities<sup>210</sup> in East Africa are occurring because of the easy availability of weapons. Livestock rustling is part of this culture, but there are rules: for example, the raiders announce their presence by drums and chants, never by ambush, and allow surrendering men to run away; women and children were always spared. However, now that large numbers of weapons are available, these traditions are being lost.

In one instance in northern Kenya a few years ago, young Pokot tribesmen brandishing AK-47s raided their

neighbours, the Marakwet. Forty-seven people were killed, most of whom were women and children;<sup>211</sup> schools, houses, and shops were burned to the ground. Such brutality and destruction were previously unheard of.

Power and authority used to rest with the village elders, but the latter are now deferring to those who carry guns. Among the once peaceful Marakwet, many have adopted the Pokot custom of wearing bead necklaces to glorify violence: white beads mean that the wearer has taken a life. And certainly no one is talking about giving up weapons since this raid.<sup>212</sup>

**Nearly eight million small arms are newly manufactured every year, the majority going into civilian hands – like a tap open on full, pouring out new weapons to add to the global pool.<sup>220</sup>**

## Guns, crime, and the lethal drugs link

Armed criminality is increasing in many countries in the world. In the UK, firearm use increased by 35 per cent in 2002;<sup>213</sup> firearms-related homicides are uncommon, but have gone up over the last few years, especially in big cities.<sup>214</sup> Three quarters of the firearms seized by police in London were air pistols, converted by gangs into .22 mm and .38 mm cartridge pistols, and supplied by one UK company from stock made in Germany.<sup>215</sup> In South Africa, illegal weapons ownership is increasing, all types of crime involving firearms have increased, and firearms-related homicide as a proportion of total homicides is increasing annually, from 41 per cent in 1994 to 49.3 per cent in 2000.<sup>216</sup> In the USA, armed homicides have been declining from a peak in 1993, but the tide may be turning again, and gang activity and gun violence are re-emerging in some cities.<sup>217</sup>

Violence is escalating as criminals acquire more lethal weapons. In the Netherlands, incidents involving firearms increased from 8 to 15 per day from 1994 to 1999, and criminals are replacing their handguns with more powerful weapons, such as machine guns.<sup>218</sup> In Central America, armed crime and violence is increasing, with criminals using military-style weapons left over from previous civil wars.<sup>219</sup>

In cases of extreme urban violence, as in parts of Brazil and elsewhere, fighting among territorial factions and with police has escalated to such a point that deaths and injuries are comparable – or worse – to situations where war has been officially declared.<sup>222</sup>

Illegal drugs militarise communities. The cultivation, processing, and distribution of drugs establish and concentrate power in the hands of those involved; they create an environment dominated by guns, used to protect and maintain the powerful interests involved, to stifle dissent, and to extort ‘taxation’. This is true both in the rural areas where farmers cultivate the plants, often under extreme economic pressure, and also in urban areas of both developed and developing countries, where drug dealers rule swathes of cities. A huge increase in firearms homicides was seen in parts of the USA and Brazil in the early 1990s, reflecting the rise in gang wars over the trade in crack cocaine.<sup>223</sup>

Armed groups are often intimately linked with drugs trafficking. An estimated 95 per cent of the world’s opium comes from war-torn nations;<sup>224</sup> drugs bankroll armed groups in Afghanistan and Myanmar (Burma), to name just two countries. Arms and drugs often travel on the same routes in different directions, using the same operators, middle-men, and carriers. Revenues from drugs finance the purchase of arms, ammunition, military equipment, uniforms, and other items; sometimes weapons are bartered directly. The Golden Triangle, a border area between Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), and Laos known for the production of opium and methamphetamine (‘speed’), has earned a new reputation as a haven through which regional rebel groups traffic AK-47 and M-16 assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, landmines, and even surface-to-air missiles.<sup>225</sup>

There are incidences of law-enforcement agencies misusing arms in attempts to tackle illegal drug trafficking. In February 2003, the Prime Minister of Thailand announced a ‘war on drugs’. The effect of the government’s campaign against drug trafficking has been criticised as a *de facto* policy of shooting to kill anyone believed to be involved in the drugs trade.<sup>226</sup> Three weeks later, Amnesty International expressed grave concern about hundreds of reported killings of drug-trafficking suspects by the Thai security forces: ‘*It is a sad fact that after 10 years of significant improvement in Thailand’s human rights record, the government has now taken a big step backwards.*’

*‘Narcotics are going north, but illegal arms and ammunition are coming south.’*

Ronald Gajraj, Guyana’s Minister of Home Affairs, 2002<sup>221</sup>

*‘I’m afraid. But the object is to make the other gang member fear me more. If I’m strapped, [wearing a weapon] then I’m even.’*

Gang member in California, USA, 2003<sup>227</sup>