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# UPDATE

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## UN Firearms Protocol

Curbing the  
spread of  
illicit weapons

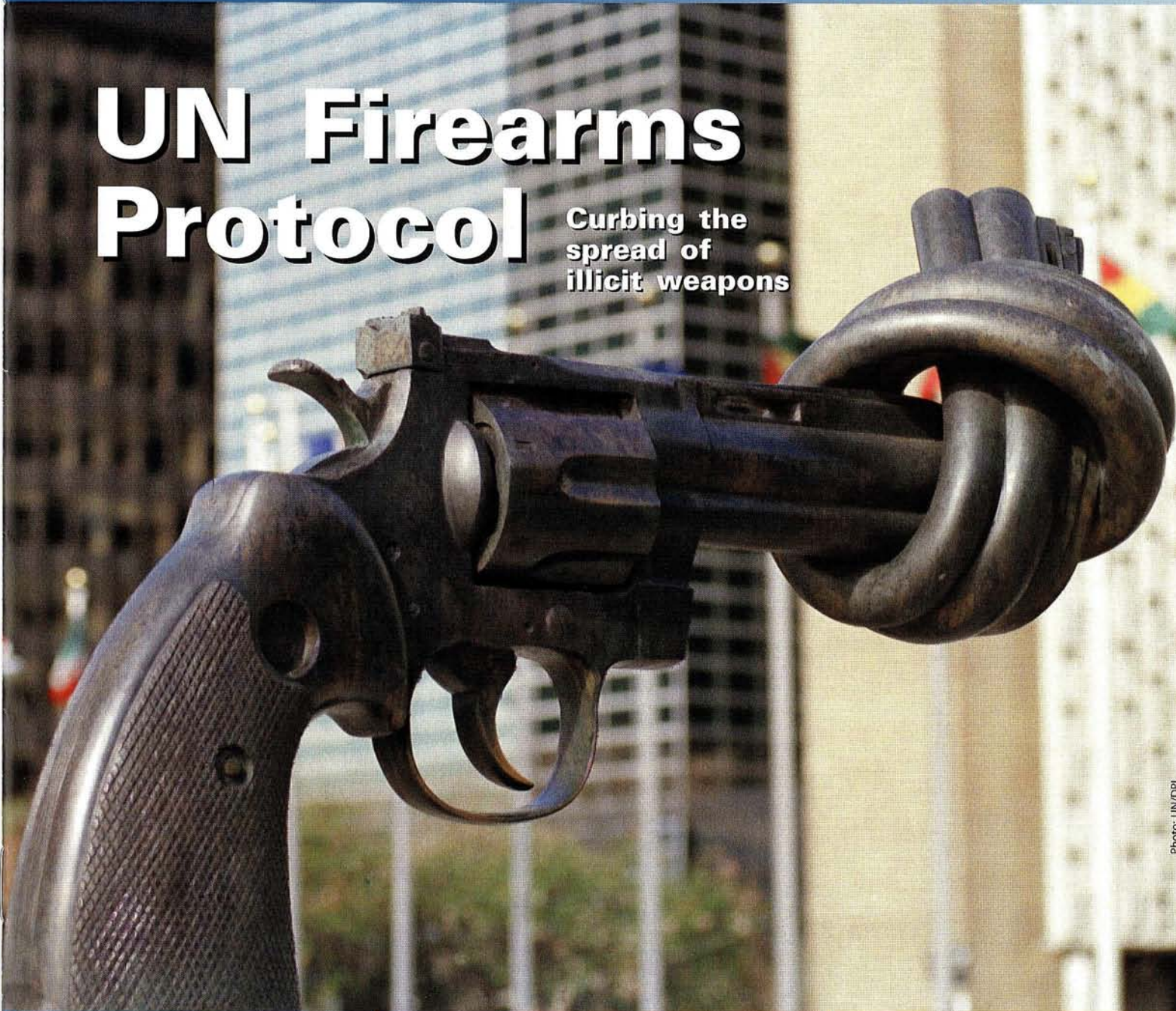


Photo: UN/DPI

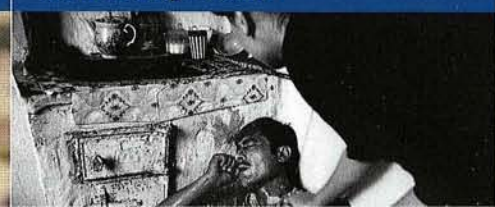
Teaming up against drugs  
in Colombia



Countering domestic violence  
in South Africa



Capturing images  
of the drug world



# UN Firearms Protocol:

*The United Nations Firearms Protocol entered into force on 3 July 2005, ushering in a new international instrument to regulate the illicit manufacturing and trafficking of small arms, which include handguns, pistols, sub-machine guns and light missiles.*



*"Health, security, education and economic growth all suffer where guns dominate".*

**Eric Berman,  
Managing Director  
of the Small Arms Survey**

Cheap and easy to use, small arms are traded globally through legal and illegal networks. They are ubiquitous and have the capacity to wreak staggering death tolls. Curbing the spread of these weapons "would be the single most important contribution to greater stability, peace and security", concludes the United Nations's refugee agency UNHCR in a study.

The damage inflicted by small arms falls into two broad categories—direct and indirect impact. Direct impacts include the number of deaths and injuries. Researchers estimate that over 600 million small arms and light weapons (SALWs) are in circulation worldwide, contributing to approximately 300,000 direct deaths each year, of which about 100,000 occur in armed conflict and 200,000 in non-conflict situations, such as homicides, suicides, unintentional shootings and police gunfire. The number of non-fatal injuries caused by small arms is unknown, but potentially even higher.

The indirect impacts of small arms are harder to quantify but the effects are profound and wide-ranging. "Health, security, education and economic growth all suffer where guns dominate", says Eric Berman, Managing Director of the Small Arms Survey, a Geneva-based independent research institute. "The malnutrition, disease, and starvation

# Curbing the spread of illicit weapons

that result from displacement at the point of a gun have to be in some sense attributable to these weapons.”

According to the Survey, the trade in small arms is worth approximately US\$ 4 billion annually. The top exporting countries in 2002 were Belgium, Brazil, China, Germany, Italy, the Russian Federation and the United States. Although data on illegal transactions are not readily available, deals may be worth up to US\$ 1 billion.

Research on illegal arms trafficking suggests that it is a global problem. Illicit arms arrive in West Africa, for example, from Central and Eastern Europe, the Russian Federation, China, as well as from other African countries. While many weapons first reach Africa as legal arms transfers, the shift from legal to illegal trade occurs through corruption, seizure and poor stockpile management. In these cases, the profits typically go to the sellers and brokers, who are non-state actors, rather than governments.

Stemming this tide is like taking on a many-headed monster. In his 25 July 2005 report on assistance to States for curbing the illicit traffic in small arms, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted that SALWs pose a “complex and multifaceted challenge to international peace and security, social and economic development, human

security, public health and human rights, among others”. Thus, the cross-cutting nature of the problem requires a “holistic, integrated and coherent approach covering all its dimensions”.

*The cross-cutting nature of the small arms problem requires a “holistic, integrated and coherent approach covering all its dimensions”.*

**United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan**

Annan is encouraged by regional and subregional efforts to curb gun violence in Africa, which could pave the way for global action, but acknowledges the difficulties in forging international agreement. Although he noted consensus on many of the fundamental issues relating to the problem of illicit small arms and light weapons, he found that other issues, such as transfers to non-state actors and the matter of civilian possession of firearms, remained controversial.

Before the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition entered into force, no international treaties or legal instruments regulated their production and spread. The United Nations Firearms Protocol supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. It aims to promote, facilitate and strengthen cooperation among States Parties to reduce trafficking in SALWs by setting out a comprehensive monitoring system.

By ratifying the Protocol, Member States of the United Nations commit themselves to adopting a series of crime-control measures and to introducing into their legislation provisions to criminalize the manufacture and trade of firearms, strengthening government licensing procedures to ensure that the firearms industry operates within a legitimate framework, and establishing effective means of marking and tracing firearms. As of September 2005, 44 Member States have ratified the Protocol.

Given the scale of the menace, this Protocol is only a first step. Nonetheless, it represents a pledge by the international community to confront the issue. As awareness of the problem grows, perhaps it will spur international action.