

# The Humanitarian Impact of UN Arms Embargoes

## Can Arms Embargoes End or Limit Violent Conflict?



(Liberian government propaganda poster)

# Research: Statistical Analysis and Case Studies

- Data set of 125 civil conflicts since World War II
- Case studies of four embargoed conflicts
  - Bosnia
  - Liberia
  - Sierra Leone
  - Somalia

# Why Embargoes Matter

- Arms embargoes are a popular policy option.
- Since 1990, the UN Security Council has declared 20 mandatory arms embargoes
  - Of these 11 were imposed to end or limit fighting. Nine were impartial, imposed on all parties.
- Ending conflict quickly would save lives, money, and lost development.

# Theoretical Goals of Arms Embargoes

- Containment
- Deterring or compelling changes in behavior
- Establishing peace

# Official Goals of Humanitarian Arms Embargoes

- “for the purposes of establishing peace and stability in Somalia” Res. 733 (1992)
- “for the purposes of establishing peace and stability in Liberia” Res. 788 (1992)
- “”for the purposes of establishing peace and stability in Kosovo” Res. 1160 (1998)

# Why it is Difficult to Influence War



- Small arms and light weapons
- Modern transportation and communication
- Propensity to stalemate
- Weak states and resilient insurgencies

# Prevailing Arms Embargo Theory

- Prevailing—but rarely analyzed—theory of how arms embargoes would operate is quite simple and intuitively plausible
  - Effective arms embargo → less arms → less fighting → peace or at least less destruction

# Flawed Assumptions

- 1. The UN can impose an entirely “effective” arms embargo
- 2. Fewer/less sophisticated arms necessarily result in less fighting and less death and destruction
- 3. Arms embargoes will change the political calculations of combatants





# Impact of Arms Embargoes: Part I

- Impartial arms embargoes often result in stalemate and prolonged conflict
- Formal or *de facto* partial embargoes can help shift military dynamics and political calculations

# Impact of Arms Embargoes: Part II

Importance of impartial  
vs. partial arms  
embargoes

Disproportionate  
supply of arms  
impacts relative  
military power

Table 1: The Military Impact of Arms Embargoes on Armed  
Combatants

<i>Type of arms embargo</i>	<i>Relative military power among combatants when embargo imposed</i>	<i>Change in relative military power among combatants</i>
Impartial embargo	Equal (stalemate)	Equal (stalemate)
Impartial embargo	Unequal (advantage better armed combatant)	Unequal (advantage better armed combatant)
Partial embargo	Equal (stalemate)	Unequal (advantage non-embargoed combatant)
Partial embargo	Unequal (advantage better armed combatant)	Unequal or equal (better armed combatant even greater advantage or weaker combatant gaining advantage)

# Impact of Arms Embargoes: Part III

- Unintended consequences of arms embargoes
  - Strengthen aggressor
  - Proliferation of factions
  - An arms embargo impacts the type of arms supplied to combatants
  - Criminalization and co-option

# Case Study: Bosnia



- Initial Serb advantage
- UN increases pressure on Serbs
- Strategic stalemate
- UN ignores increasing Bosnian-Muslim violations
- Change military balance
- U.S. pressure for settlement

# Case Study: Liberia



- Taylor's initial advance on Monrovia stopped by ECOMOG intervention
- Taylor's again nearly takes Monrovia—stopped by strengthened ECOMOG and arms embargo
- Impact of arms embargo
- Stalemate
- Taylor “wins” elections
- Resumption of war
- “Enhanced” embargo de facto only enforced against Taylor
- Taylor goes into exile as LURD and MODEL on outskirts of Monrovia

# Case Study: Somalia



- Abundance of arms
- UN arms embargo imposed
- International military intervention
- Continued flow of arms
- Factors undermining arms embargo
- Perverse and unintended consequences

# Conclusion: “Do No Harm,” Need for a UN Strategy

- Arms embargoes are not irrelevant. May not “work,” but arms embargoes do have important impact on conflict
  - Unrealistic goals
- Need for comprehensive strategic approach—not piecemeal
  - Enforcement necessary, but not sufficient
  - May need to choose a side
- Role of Secretary-General and UN Secretariat