



Organization Profile: Regional Centre on Small Arms and Light Weapons

by Dan Baker [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

The following article examines the Regional Centre on Small Arms and Light Weapons, which was created in March 2000. Since its inception, RECSA has provided its member states with support in the creation of National Focal Points on small-arms control and management. With its help, seven of RECSA's member states have developed National Action Plans with goals including SA/LW marking, weapons disposal, and SA/LW education/awareness. Two additional countries are expected to have Action Plans in place in 2011.



Africa's Great Lakes region is renowned for some of the most beautiful and ecologically diverse freshwater systems in the world including Lake Victoria, the world's second largest lake. Unfortunately, the region is also notorious for an abundance of illicit small arms and light weapons, a problem that has created lingering conflicts, political instability and a prevalence of armed crime.¹ Even schoolchildren are aware of how SA/LW impact their communities. In 2007 a 14-year-old Ugandan girl won a school essay writing competition organized by RECSA by writing on the dangers of illegal small arms, citing that their presence resulted in the "propagation of sexual abuse, cattle rustling, abductions, low levels of development [and the] displacement of persons."²

The need to address this crisis was first recognized on 15 March 2000, when Ministers and other representatives from the governments of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda united to sign the *Nairobi Declaration on the Problem of Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa*. The Declaration was brief but important. In four pages, the politically-binding document stated the member nations' concerns, urged joint efforts as the only means of alleviating their concerns, invited the counsel of the United Nations, and requested "financial, technical and political support from the international community."³

The Nairobi Declaration led to the creation of the Regional Center on Small Arms and Light Weapons based in Nairobi, Kenya. RECSA's mission is "to prevent, combat and eradicate stockpiling and illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons in the Great Lakes Region and Horn of Africa."¹ Though RESCA is a nongovernmental organization, the governments of Belgium, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as the European Union and the United Nations Development Programme's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, have enabled its growth by financially supporting its programs.

In addition to the National Focal Points created in the 10 original member nations, RESCA created NFPs and SA/LW management bodies in the Republic of Seychelles and the Federal Transitional Government of Somalia. In 2009, the Republic of Congo was admitted into membership. Today, RECSA focuses on implementing National Action Plans, facilitating arms marking and weapons disposal, and organizing awareness campaigns in each of its 13 member states.

In 2001, Tanzania's NFP became the first to develop a National Action Plan for combating the problem of illegal SA/LW

in the country. Visiting 3,500 households, Tanzanian police conducted surveys that collectively revealed "information on the physical nature of the small-arms problem, on the attitudes and experiences of the population, and on existing resources to tackle the identified problems."⁴ From this data, the Tanzanian NFP formed a National Action Plan focusing on improved legislation, police training, weapons collection and destruction, and education.⁴ Following Tanzania's example, Kenya and Uganda soon developed their own National Action Plans as well, and in 2009, Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea and Rwanda became the most recent National Action Plan holders.²

RECSA also focuses on marking each legally-owned small arm or light weapon in order to make it uniquely identifiable. The International Action Network on Small Arms states that appropriate marking involves permanently signifying "every SA/LW and its essential components... so as to easily identify, at a minimum, the manufacturer, country of manufacture, a unique serial number, and the year of production."⁵ Arms marking allows authorities to trace weapons as they move from manufacturer to consumer and beyond. This ability is critical because the vast majority of SA/LW are manufactured and sold legally. Only later does another party end up stealing them, or the original purchaser illegally sells or trades them. In a 2010 statement, RECSA's Executive Secretary, Dr. Francis K. Sang, announced that RECSA was proud to have distributed 31 arms-marking units among its 13 member states, in addition to the Republic of Zambia and the Central African Republic in the previous year.² This contribution will be especially beneficial in places like Rwanda, where authorities were previously marking SA/LW manually.

RECSA is also committed to educating its member states about the issue of illegal SA/LW in the Great Lakes, the Horn of Africa and bordering regions. RECSA achieves this goal through media and information campaigns with the goal of creating public awareness of illicit-arms dangers, as well as encouraging individuals and groups to surrender their illegal arms voluntarily.

Awareness campaigns take on many shapes: Street marches, newspaper supplements, distribution of information materials, television advertisements, public destruction of arms, and media interviews are just a few examples of activities undertaken in the various countries.

With National Action Plans in place in seven of its 13 member states, RECSA has overseen the marking of 72,612 SA/LW and disposed of 309,735 SA/LW since its inception. Also in that time, it has destroyed 55,300 landmines and 6,371 tons (5,779 metric tons) of unexploded ordnance and ammunition. Its awareness campaigns have also produced results: A recent campaign in Burundi led to the voluntary surrender of more than 15,900 firearms, grenades, bombs and landmines.²

However, RECSA has unfinished work. In March 2010, the European Commission reported that civilians hold 79 percent of all weapons in Africa,⁶ but after 10 years of experience and accomplishments, it is hard to believe RECSA will not persevere. The organization already has a number of projects planned for 2011. One is the development of SA/LW software, which is expected to streamline RECSA's data-collection processes. The software will allow users to "capture data generated during arms marking, ... manage information about movement of arms from government armories, manage records of civilians who own arms legally and [store] information on arms destruction/disposal."⁷ For more information visit <http://www.recsasec.org>. 

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Endnotes

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