

# From the Barrel of the Gun

Ekram Kabir's study on small arms proliferation sheds light on a menace that has threatened to tear apart our already fragile democracy.

**T**HE post-Soviet unipolar world has been witnessing a flurry of unauthorised small arms falling into the hands of warlords and insurgents. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, about 10,000 or more people have died due to small arms. In his first book, titled 'Proliferation of Unauthorised Small Arms', journalist Ekram Kabir traces back this threat to the cold war; due to which, he writes, "more and more small arms are pumped in by the western powers to fight Communism in Indo-China".

During the early eighties, things got even worse for these South-east Asian countries, as ethnic insurgents started to use poppy-trade to fuel their war. This disturbing trend repeated itself across South Asia too. The Soviet-backed revolution led to a bloody and ruthless civil war in Afghanistan; and the mujahideens, armed with the blessings and military logistics of the US, flooded the already volatile underground arms market with the latest devices.

"During the war in Afghanistan, of the original 900 stringer SAMS that the US supplied to Pakistan to deliver to the Mujahideens, as many as 560 were untraceable," Ekram writes. Unbridled arms business was soon followed by poppy-trading, wreaking havoc in Afghanistan and Southern Pakistan where thousands of Afghan refugees were staying in camps.

Another major source of illegal arms in the region has been the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE). When the Indian government withdrew its support in the eighties, the LTTE kept its supply-line up and running by developing a unique international network.

Unauthorised arms proliferation has taken a grave turn in the early nineties.

In fact, US, the world's only superpower, is also the world's largest producer of small arms. "It has the largest number of companies for a single country that produce small arms or ammunition, is a major exporter of small arms, and is estimated to have one of the world's largest domestic markets for small arms," Ekram writes.

In Asia, China produces the largest cache of small arms, most of which are used by its own army. Ekram, quoting a recent study writes that, "At its peak the Chinese military inventory probably totalled at least 27 million firearms, probably the biggest in the world."

So, how do these weapons make their journey from a



*Proliferation of Unauthorised Small Arms  
Impediments to Democratisation in Bangladesh  
By Ekram Kabir  
A NewsNetwork Study  
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**AHMEDE HUSSAIN**

manufacturing plant in North America or Europe to the ragged terrain of Nepal or yam fields of Uganda? In varied ways, writes Ekram; of them one is stealing arms and ammunition from national storehouses.

Ekram has discovered that some manufacturing companies, in connivance with their governments, forge documents to supply arms to Sierra Leone or Liberia, countries that are under arms embargo.

Ekram touches the threads of this threat to world peace with brilliance, but what makes the book a must for any researcher is its portrayal of the local scenario. And it is quite grim indeed. The country, which was primarily used as a transit for smuggling weapons in the late eighties, has now become a big market itself.

Ekram's investigation goes deep down into this thriving business; with a journalist's nose and a writer's mastery, he tracks down the types and nature of the weapons used in Bangladesh. Huge caches of arms that were used to fight the Pakistani occupation forces have never been surrendered. Three other major sources of arms procurement that Ekram has found in his study are external sources like, "a foreign government that gives arms to friendly insurgents, international arms dealers and individuals/insurgents who sympathise with insurgents of another country."

Signs of a researcher's hard work are evident in every page of this book. The writer does not even forget to sprinkle some wit on this sordid saga; while describing brands of pistols, readers get to know things like what 32-bore (Ruby pistol) or 22-bore (tokai pistol) pistols are called in the curb market. Ekram's prose is, in most cases, pleasantly intelligible and at times gets poetic ("Crawling with crime and sleaze, Dhaka's underworld is a place where the extent of murder, mayhem and the use of illegal arms would put any mafia movie to shame").

Though throughout the book Ekram mesmerises the reader with his mastery over the subject, readers may stumble on some acute bouts of sloppy editing. The indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are referred to as Juma people (instead of Jhumma).

Apart from the slip-ups, Ekram's first book is thorough, extensive and a job well done. It is something researchers working on national security issues in the country have looked forward to, and Ekram quenches their thirst well. A must read.