

Australian government assault rifle now a common crime gun in Papua New Guinea

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Philip Alpers *

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Introduction

Philip Alpers, adjunct associate professor at the School of Public Health, University of Sydney writes that in Papua-New Guinea

"...the Australian SLR remains the experienced criminal's assault weapon of choice. ...of the 7,664 M-16 and SLR assault rifles delivered to the PNG Defence Force since 1971, only 2,013 (26 per cent) remain in stock. ... now, Australia faces the near-inevitability of its own peacemakers facing its own guns."

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Essay - Australian government assault rifle now a common crime gun in Papua New Guinea

In the most volatile province of Papua New Guinea, tribal fighters, criminals and mercenary gunmen alike swear by the Australian-made SLR, or self-loading rifle. American made M-16s and AR-15s taken from military and police armouries are also popular, concealable handguns proliferate in the cities, and home-made guns are ubiquitous in PNG, but at least in the Southern Highlands, the Australian SLR remains the experienced criminal's assault weapon of choice.

In the mid-70s, the Australian government armed PNG's fledgling police, military and prison services, shipping more than 10,000 firearms northwards as a gesture of neighbourly goodwill. These days, of the 7,664 M-16 and SLR assault rifles delivered to the PNG Defence Force since 1971, only 2,013 (26 per cent) remain in stock. Around 1,000 police guns also went missing, with an ongoing audit suggesting losses of 30%. While damage, loss and attrition account for a good proportion of the missing government guns, many more were victims of "leakage."

In the Southern Highlands alone, upwards of 1,000 illicit, high-powered weapons are now loose, and even the police minister concedes that the constabulary routinely sells its ammunition to tribal fighters and criminals.

Very few guns in the Southern Highlands were smuggled from foreign countries. PNG's real arms dealers are much closer to home than the 'foreign gun-runners' so often blamed by public figures. Instead, police and soldiers within PNG supplied the most destructive firearms used in crime and conflict. Gun-running from state armouries in the cities to the Highlands is financed and facilitated by politicians and civil servants up to the highest levels of the educated elite. Many, and perhaps most, illicit high-powered firearms in the Southern Highlands were deployed by political candidates, sitting MPs, and their supporters to impress and intimidate both rivals and voters. After winning the 2002 election, Prime Minister Morauta conceded that 'every candidate' was involved.

In November 2007, PNG faces another national election. Already Canberra is gearing up to assist, and with any luck to help reduce the violence which has become a feature of electoral politics in its closest neighbour. In past years, Australia has done a good job choking off ammunition supplies to PNG, and of strengthening local armouries to stem the flow of guns to criminals. But most of the missing assault rifles, pistols and machine guns were already gone. And now, Australia faces the near-inevitability of its own peacemakers facing its own guns.

Information about the author

Philip Alpers is an adjunct associate professor at the School of Public Health, University of Sydney, and was previously a senior fellow at the Harvard Injury Control Research Center, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston. A policy analyst in the public health effects of gun-related violence and firearm regulation since 1992, he is accredited to the UN small arms process and consults on international gun policy for a variety of organizations. This article draws on the detailed research reported in Philip Alpers, [Gun-running in Papua New Guinea: From Arrows to Assault Weapons in the Southern Highlands](#), Special Report No. 5, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, June 2005.

The [Small Arms Survey](#) is an independent research project located at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. Established in 1999 with the support of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, it currently receives additional funding from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

Web site: <http://www.gunpolicy.org>

This article first appeared on [Crikey](#).

Nautilus invites your response

The Austral Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to the editor, Jane Mullett: austral@rmit.edu.au. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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