

# ZISMUN

Zurich International School MUN



**Dear Delegates,**

Welcome to ZISMUN 2026 and to the African Union committee. It is our pleasure to introduce the topic “Curbing Cross-Border Arms Smuggling through a Continental Arms Control Treaty in the African Union.” This issue lies at the heart of many of the security, development, and governance challenges facing the African continent today and demands careful, informed, and cooperative debate.

The illicit circulation of small arms and light weapons across African borders has played a significant role in prolonging armed conflicts, empowering terrorist and insurgent groups, enabling organized crime, and undermining state authority. From the Sahel to the Horn of Africa, from the Great Lakes region to parts of Southern Africa, cross border arms smuggling has exacerbated instability and slowed post conflict recovery. Despite existing regional and international frameworks, weak enforcement, porous borders, corruption, and uneven national capacities continue to allow illicit weapons to flow freely.

As delegates of the African Union, you are tasked with considering whether a continental arms control resolution, designed specifically for Africa’s political, geographic, and security realities, could strengthen cooperation, harmonize national legislation, and enhance collective security without undermining state sovereignty. You will need to balance the diverse perspectives of AU member states, ranging from conflict affected countries seeking stronger controls to manufacturing, transit, and post conflict states with differing priorities and capacities.

We expect delegates to arrive well researched, with a strong understanding of their assigned country’s position, alliances amongst countries, and existing African and international treaties and agreements. Constructive diplomacy, realistic policy proposals, and a willingness to compromise will be essential. Your ultimate goal is not simply to identify the problem, but to design solutions that are practical, inclusive, and implementable at the continental level.

We look forward to thoughtful debate and innovative resolutions.

**Sincerely,  
Your Chairs,  
Sabrina & Reeta**

# *Curbing Cross-Border Arms Smuggling through a Continental Arms Control Treaty*

## General Overview of the Situation:

Cross border arms smuggling constitutes a central driver of insecurity, armed violence, and underdevelopment across the African continent. The illicit movement of small arms and light weapons (SALW) across national borders sustains civil wars, enables terrorist and extremist organizations, strengthens organized criminal networks, and contributes to widespread violent crime. Unlike heavy conventional weapons, SALW are relatively cheap, easy to conceal, and highly durable, allowing them to circulate for decades once introduced into illicit markets. As a result, even low intensity trafficking can have long term destabilizing effects. Africa's vulnerability to arms smuggling is deeply rooted in its geography, history, and political landscape. Many African states share extensive land borders that cut across deserts, rainforests, savannahs, and lakes with minimal infrastructure or state presence. In regions such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes, borders often divide ethnic, pastoral, and trading communities that have historically moved freely across territory. While these patterns of movement are not inherently criminal, they are frequently exploited by arms traffickers operating alongside smugglers of drugs, minerals, fuel, and people. Weak border management, limited customs capacity, and corruption within security institutions further facilitate the illicit flow of weapons.

The circulation of illicit arms in Africa is closely tied to both ongoing conflicts and the legacy of past wars. Weapons left over from liberation struggles, Cold War proxy conflicts, and civil wars in countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo remain in circulation today. In many cases, post conflict disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes were incomplete or poorly funded, leaving large numbers of weapons unsecured. Poor stockpile management within national militaries and police forces has also allowed arms to leak into illicit markets, from where they are smuggled across borders and used in new conflicts.

The destabilization of Libya following the 2011 conflict has had particularly severe continental consequences. Large quantities of weapons looted from Libyan stockpiles flowed south into the Sahel and beyond, significantly strengthening armed groups in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Nigeria. This influx of arms contributed directly to the resurgence of insurgencies and the expansion of jihadist networks affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Libya's ongoing instability continues to make it a major source and transit hub for illicit weapons, despite efforts by neighboring states and international actors to contain the problem.

Terrorism and violent extremism have dramatically increased demand for smuggled arms across Africa. Boko Haram and its splinter groups in the Lake Chad Basin, Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya, and Islamic State affiliated groups in the Sahel rely heavily on illicit

weapons to sustain their operations. These groups operate transnationally, moving fighters and arms across borders with relative ease. As a result, insecurity in one state frequently spills over into neighboring countries, making unilateral national responses insufficient and reinforcing the need for coordinated continental action.

African Union member states experience and approach the problem of arms smuggling differently depending on their geographic position, security situation, and political priorities. North African states play a crucial role as both transit points and sources of illicit arms. Algeria has long advocated for strong regional cooperation on arms control, particularly in the Sahel, and has invested heavily in border security and intelligence sharing. Egypt emphasizes strict national control over arms transfers and border security, viewing arms smuggling primarily through the lens of counterterrorism and state sovereignty. Tunisia supports enhanced regional cooperation and legal harmonization, while Morocco focuses on maritime security and counter smuggling operations linked to organized crime.

Libya represents a unique case within the African Union. Due to ongoing political fragmentation and conflict, Libya lacks the institutional capacity to effectively control its borders or secure its stockpiles. As a result, it is widely recognized as one of the largest sources of illicit arms on the continent. Many AU member states view stabilizing Libya and addressing arms proliferation there as a prerequisite for broader continental progress.

At the continental level, the African Union has repeatedly acknowledged that fragmented national and sub regional approaches are insufficient to address the scale and complexity of arms smuggling. Initiatives such as the AU's *Silencing the Guns in Africa* agenda reflect strong political commitment, but implementation has been uneven due to resource constraints and differing national priorities. In this context, the proposal for a continental arms control treaty seeks to harmonize legal standards, strengthen cooperation, and create collective accountability while respecting the sovereignty and diversity of AU member states.

## Key Definitions:

### **Illicit Arms Trafficking:**

The unauthorized manufacture, transfer, or movement of weapons and ammunition across borders in violation of national or international law.

### **Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW):**

Many portable weapons such as pistols, rifles, assault rifles, machine guns, and portable rocket launchers.

### **Continental Arms Control Treaty:**

A legally binding agreement among African Union member states regulating arms production, transfer, stockpiling, and disposal.

### **Stockpile Management:**

Policies and practices ensuring secure storage, accurate record keeping, and safe destruction of weapons.

**ECOWAS:**

Economic Community of West African States.

**Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR):**

Lays the groundwork for safeguarding and sustaining the communities to which ex combatants return to, while building capacity for long-term peace, security and development.

## Historical Situation:

The roots of cross border arms smuggling in Africa are closely tied to the continent's colonial legacy and the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War. During the colonial period, European powers introduced firearms to enforce control and suppress resistance, often without establishing long term systems for regulation or accountability. As independence movements gained momentum in the mid 20th century, weapons became central tools in liberation struggles across Southern, Eastern, and Central Africa. Large quantities of arms were supplied to both colonial authorities and liberation movements, laying the foundation for future proliferation.

The Cold War significantly intensified arms flows into Africa. Both the United States and the Soviet Union, along with their allies, supplied weapons to proxy forces across the continent in pursuit of ideological influence. Conflicts in Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo saw massive inflows of small arms and light weapons, many of which were never recovered after hostilities ended. When these conflicts concluded, weak post war institutions lacked the capacity to collect, secure, or destroy surplus weapons, allowing them to circulate freely.

The end of the Cold War did not reduce arms smuggling; instead, it transformed it. The collapse of the Soviet Union released vast stockpiles of surplus weapons onto global black markets, many of which were trafficked into Africa. At the same time, the withdrawal of superpower oversight left many African conflicts unresolved or poorly managed. During the 1990s, devastating civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo demonstrated how easily illicit arms could cross borders and regionalize violence.

These conflicts revealed the inadequacy of purely national responses to arms proliferation. Weapons smuggled into one country were frequently used to destabilize neighbors, creating cycles of insecurity. In response, African states began to pursue regional approaches. The ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Moratorium on Small Arms (1998), later replaced by the ECOWAS Convention (2006), marked a turning point by recognizing arms control as a shared regional responsibility. Similar initiatives emerged in East Africa through the Nairobi Protocol and in Southern Africa through the SADC Protocol on Firearms.

At the continental level, the transformation of the Organization of African Unity into the African Union in 2002 reflected a growing emphasis on collective security. Arms control became increasingly integrated into the AU's peace and security agenda, culminating in

initiatives such as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the *Silencing the Guns in Africa* campaign. However, despite these efforts, the absence of a single, legally binding continental treaty left enforcement fragmented and uneven.

## Current Situation:

Today, cross border arms smuggling remains a major driver of insecurity across Africa, evolving in complexity and scale. Ongoing conflicts, political instability, climate related resource pressures, and expanding transnational criminal networks continue to generate demand for illicit weapons. Smuggling routes have adapted to enforcement efforts, increasingly relying on remote border regions, maritime corridors, and informal airstrips.

In West Africa, arms smuggling has been a persistent challenge since the civil wars of the 1990s and early 2000s. Nigeria strongly supports robust continental action due to the impact of arms smuggling on Boko Haram related violence and banditry. Ghana and Senegal, which enjoy relative stability, emphasize preventive regulation, strong legal frameworks, and capacity building. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger currently at the epicenter of Sahelian insecurity advocate urgent international and continental assistance to stem arms flows fueling insurgencies. Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone stress post conflict stockpile management and regional cooperation through ECOWAS mechanisms.

Central African states face chronic challenges related to weak governance and ongoing conflict. The Democratic Republic of the Congo consistently calls for stronger controls on cross border arms flows to prevent rebel groups from accessing weapons through neighboring states. Cameroon supports regional enforcement initiatives but faces internal security challenges related to both Boko Haram and separatist violence. Chad emphasizes counterterrorism cooperation and border security, while the Central African Republic highlights the link between arms smuggling and state fragility.

In East Africa and the Horn of Africa, arms smuggling is closely tied to protracted conflicts and fragile states. Somalia supports international and continental assistance for arms control but remains constrained by limited state capacity. Kenya and Ethiopia favor regional mechanisms aligned with the Nairobi Protocol and emphasize intelligence sharing and joint border patrols. Sudan and South Sudan highlight post conflict challenges, including the proliferation of weapons among civilian populations. Uganda and Tanzania support harmonized legislation and regional coordination to prevent arms diversion.

Southern African states generally experience lower levels of armed conflict but remain concerned about illicit arms circulation. South Africa, as one of the continent's few arms producers, supports regulation and transparency but is cautious about measures that could affect its defense industry. Angola and Mozambique emphasize the need to address surplus weapons from past conflicts. Zimbabwe stresses national sovereignty and non interference, while Botswana and Namibia favor strong legal frameworks and AU oversight mechanisms.

African island states such as Seychelles, Mauritius, and Cape Verde focus primarily on maritime arms trafficking and port security. While they are less affected by land based

smuggling, they emphasize the importance of monitoring shipping routes and preventing arms diversion through commercial ports.

The Sahel has emerged as one of the most critical hotspots. Countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad face overlapping crises of terrorism, insurgency, and organized crime, all fueled by illicit arms flows. Weapons originating from Libyan stockpiles following the 2011 conflict continue to circulate widely, strengthening extremist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Despite national and international military interventions, the ease with which arms cross borders undermines stabilization efforts.

In the Horn of Africa, prolonged instability in Somalia and intermittent conflict in Sudan and South Sudan contribute to persistent arms proliferation. Al-Shabaab relies heavily on smuggled weapons to conduct cross border attacks, particularly affecting Kenya and Ethiopia. In Central Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo continues to struggle with armed groups supplied through neighboring states, highlighting the regional nature of the problem.

Although many African states are parties to the Arms Trade Treaty, implementation remains inconsistent. Reporting requirements, export controls, and stockpile management practices vary significantly, creating loopholes that traffickers exploit. Sub regional frameworks function unevenly, and coordination between them is limited. These challenges have reinforced calls within the African Union for a harmonized, continent wide legal framework.

## Key Treaties/Agreements:

### **Arms Trade Treaty (ATT):**

A global, legally binding treaty regulating international transfers of conventional arms to prevent diversion to illicit markets and human rights violations.

### **UN Programme of Action on Small Arms (PoA):**

A politically binding framework promoting national legislation, international cooperation, and improved stockpile management.

### **ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons:**

A legally binding West African agreement regulating manufacture, transfer, and possession of SALW.

### **Nairobi Protocol:**

A regional agreement addressing arms proliferation in East and Central Africa through harmonized legislation and cooperation.

### **SADC Protocol on the Control of Firearms:**

A Southern African framework focusing on legal harmonization and cross border enforcement.



## Key Country Positions:

### Nigeria

Nigeria is one of the strongest advocates within the African Union for robust continental action against cross border arms smuggling. As the most populous country in Africa and a key regional power in West Africa, Nigeria has been heavily affected by the illicit flow of small arms, particularly in relation to the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin and the rise of armed banditry in its northwestern regions. Smuggled weapons enter Nigeria primarily through porous borders with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, highlighting the limitations of unilateral border enforcement. Nigeria strongly supports harmonized arms control legislation, intelligence sharing, and joint border patrols under AU and ECOWAS frameworks. It is a party to the Arms Trade Treaty and has invested in national arms control institutions, such as the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW). However, Nigeria emphasizes that any continental treaty must include provisions for technical and financial assistance to states with limited enforcement capacity, arguing that security in Africa is only as strong as its weakest border.

### Libya

Libya occupies a central and highly sensitive position in discussions on arms smuggling in Africa. Since the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, Libya has become one of the largest sources of illicit weapons on the continent. Arms looted from state stockpiles have been trafficked across North Africa and deep into the Sahel, directly contributing to instability in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad. Due to ongoing political fragmentation and weak central authority, Libya currently lacks the institutional capacity to effectively regulate arms transfers or secure its borders. While Libyan authorities formally support continental arms control efforts, implementation remains extremely limited. Many AU member states view Libya less as a negotiating equal and more as a critical security challenge that must be stabilized for any continental treaty to succeed. As a result, discussions often focus on how a treaty could support post conflict stockpile management, monitoring mechanisms, and international oversight in fragile states like Libya.

### South Africa

South Africa plays a unique role as one of the few African countries with a significant domestic arms manufacturing and export sector. While South Africa is not a major source of illicit arms within Africa, it is highly influential in shaping continental policy debates. The government supports transparency, responsible arms exports, and international norms, and it is a party to the Arms Trade Treaty. However, South Africa approaches the idea of a continental arms control treaty with caution. It emphasizes the need to protect legitimate defense industries and national sovereignty, warning against overly restrictive measures that could hinder lawful arms production and trade. South Africa advocates for strong export controls, end user verification, and information sharing, but prefers flexibility in



implementation rather than rigid enforcement mechanisms imposed by a supranational authority.

### **Algeria**

Algeria is a leading advocate for regional security cooperation, particularly in North and West Africa. With long borders shared with Libya, Mali, Niger, and Tunisia, Algeria faces significant risks from arms smuggling linked to terrorism and organized crime. Its historical experience with internal conflict in the 1990s has made arms control a core national security priority. Algeria strongly supports intelligence sharing, joint border operations, and regional coordination under AU frameworks. While protective of its sovereignty, Algeria generally favors stronger continental mechanisms if they enhance collective security and counterterrorism efforts. It has consistently called for addressing arms proliferation at its sources, including conflict zones and poorly managed stockpiles, making it a potential supporter of robust treaty monitoring provisions.

### **Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)**

The DRC is one of the countries most affected by cross border arms smuggling and is among the strongest supporters of stricter continental controls. Armed groups operating in eastern Congo rely heavily on weapons trafficked through neighboring states, perpetuating cycles of violence and humanitarian crises. The DRC advocates for legally binding obligations on arms transfers, stronger border monitoring, and regional accountability mechanisms. It frequently argues that neighboring states must share responsibility for preventing arms diversion. However, the DRC also faces challenges related to internal governance and enforcement capacity, making it highly supportive of international assistance and AU led capacity building initiatives under any continental treaty.

### **Kenya**

Kenya views arms smuggling primarily through the lens of counterterrorism and regional stability in East Africa. Illicit weapons fuel attacks by Al-Shabaab and contribute to inter-communal violence along Kenya's borders with Somalia, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. Kenya supports regional mechanisms such as the Nairobi Protocol and emphasizes intelligence sharing and joint operations. Kenya is broadly supportive of a continental arms control treaty, provided it builds upon existing regional frameworks rather than replacing them. It favors coordination and standardization but stresses that implementation must remain practical and sensitive to regional security dynamics.

## Possible Solutions:

### **Adoption of a Legally Binding Continental Arms Control Treaty:**

The African Union could negotiate and adopt a continent wide, legally binding treaty regulating the manufacture, transfer, stockpiling, and disposal of small arms and light weapons. This treaty would aim to harmonize national legislation and close regulatory gaps exploited by traffickers.

### **Harmonization of National Firearms Legislation:**

AU member states could align definitions, licensing requirements, penalties, and enforcement procedures related to firearms to prevent traffickers from exploiting weaker legal systems in neighboring states.

### **Creation of an AU Arms Control Monitoring Body:**

Establish a specialized AU agency or mechanism responsible for monitoring compliance, collecting data, facilitating reporting, and providing technical assistance related to arms control.

### **Continental Arms Transfer and Tracing Database:**

Develop a shared, secure digital database for tracking legal arms transfers, marking weapons, and tracing seized illicit arms across borders.

### **Strengthened Border Management and Joint Patrols:**

Encourage joint border patrols, shared surveillance infrastructure, and coordinated customs operations between neighboring states, particularly in high risk regions such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa.

### **Improved Stockpile Management and Security:**

Assist states in securing military and police stockpiles through improved storage facilities, inventory systems, regular audits, and destruction of surplus or obsolete weapons.

### **Mandatory Weapons Marking and Record Keeping:**

Require standardized marking of all legally manufactured and imported weapons to enable tracing and reduce diversion into illicit markets.

### **Enhanced Intelligence Sharing Mechanisms:**

Strengthen intelligence cooperation between AU member states, including information sharing on trafficking routes, criminal networks, and arms brokers.

### **Capacity Building and Technical Assistance Programs:**

Provide training, funding, and logistical support to states with limited enforcement capacity, particularly fragile and post conflict countries.

### **Stronger Oversight of Arms Brokers and Middlemen:**

Regulate arms brokers operating within or across African borders through licensing, transparency requirements, and penalties for violations.

## **Further Readings:**

[Weapons Compass - Nicolas Florquin et al](#)

[Bamako Declaration on an African Common Position on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons - African Union](#)

[The West Africa-Sahel Connection: Mapping Cross-border Arms Trafficking - Fiona Mangan and Matthias Nowak](#)

[Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons in Sub-Saharan Africa - Andrea Edoardo et al](#)

[Firearms Trafficking in the Sahel - United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#)

[Managing Land Borders and the Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons - Jihan Seniora and Cédric Poitevin](#)

[Small Arms Survey - Small Arms Survey \(Geneva\)](#)

[The Trafficking of Improvised Explosive Device Components and Commercial Explosives in West Africa - Small Arms Survey](#)

[Resolution 1467 \(2003\) - United Nations Security Council](#)

[Resolution 1209 \(1998\) - United Nations Security Council](#)

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