



Himaba victim of Landmine at Orupembe, Namibia — Photo: Mark Hakansson (Panos)

This CHRI report – *Over a Barrel: Light Weapons and Human Rights in the Commonwealth* – exposes a tragic contradiction in the modern Commonwealth. This community of peoples from 54 countries has recognised human rights and good governance as central organising principles of membership. Yet millions of assault rifles, high-explosives, mortars, landmines and other light weapons are flowing throughout a global network of conflicts, feeding violence and jeopardising development and democracy. Many of the Commonwealth's 1.8 billion citizens live in fear and suffer human rights abuses at the hands of unaccountable state security forces, terrorist militants and armed criminals. The right to peace, the right to protection from fear, the right to development, the right to know about the arms governments sell or buy, and the enjoyment of civil liberties guarded by democratic institutions – these rights exist in the shadow of a worldwide crisis of light weapons proliferation.

CHRI asks in this report whether a leading member of the Commonwealth – the United Kingdom – is doing enough to control the flow of weapons in the developing world, or whether its own arms exports, which are greater than those of all other West European countries combined, are feeding conflicts. In addition, South Africa's arms exports are considered beside its rejuvenated status as a rights-based society.

The relationship of light weapons movements to conflicts in Commonwealth South Asia and Commonwealth Africa are examined in specialist chapters. Why is militancy wearing at the fabric of the world's largest democracy, India? Why are the newly democratised states of southern Africa, who are now officially at peace, still suffering from extremely high levels of gun violence? Why has West Africa, and particularly Sierra Leone, been convulsed by some of the most brutal wars in recent history, featuring drugged teenage soldiers chopping the limbs from innocent civilians? Who provides the weapons to arm the factions, splinter groups, rebel armies and undemocratic regimes ultimately responsible for this violence? Here, activists and experts intimately familiar with the subject shed light on all these issues.

How will the Commonwealth address its commitment to protect "the right of all men and women to live in ways which sustain and nourish human dignity"? CHRI provides in this report a clear set of urgent recommendations – based on the experience of citizens' groups, charity and relief organisations, and government agencies – opening a way forward for the Commonwealth. The crisis of light weapons proliferation cannot be ignored.

Commonwealth

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CHRI

# Over a Barrel

## Light Weapons & Human Rights in the Commonwealth

A report by the non-governmental  
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Advisory Commission chaired by  
Professor Margaret Reynolds



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