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Up to 4m guns in UK and police are losing the battle

'IoS' investigation: Another week, another horrific shooting. The culture of illegal firearms is running out of control

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Sunday, 4 September 2005

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British criminals could have access to as many as four million illegal firearms, criminal intelligence experts warn.

The criminal possession and use of firearms, a hallmark of urban America, is now a significant threat in Britain, too, says the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS), despite moves to increase penalties for gun crime.

Senior police officers admit that more needs to be done in tracking the source of illegal guns flooding Britain in a bid to curb gun-related violence.

Zainab Kalokoh, 33, was shot in the head as she cradled a baby at a christening last Saturday in Peckham, south London.

Two teenagers have been charged with the crime.

Commander Cressida Dick, who is in charge of the Met's Operation Trident unit, which tackles gun crime in the black community, said that genuine firearms were still expensive to obtain but that there was real concern over the availability of converted weapons.

"People are very concerned about the level of firearms availability and firearms offences," Commander Dick told The Independent on Sunday. "I don't think we do know enough about supply, either in terms of the sources or the volume. We need to know more to suppress it."

Some of the guns brought into the UK are weapons beloved of gun fanatics: machine pistols such as Uzis, and semi-automatics including the ubiquitous AK-47.

But in recent years Customs officers have seen an increase in the number of weapons smuggled in from Central and Eastern Europe. These include dozens of east European Uzi-style pistols.

Hand grenades and Semtex, too, have been intercepted. Customs seized nearly 300 handguns, rifles and shotguns being brought in illegally last year.

Two men were jailed for life three weeks ago for using an AK-47 to kill David King, a drug dealer from Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, in 2003 - the first time that an automatic weapon had been used during a crime in the UK. The gun, from Hungary, was sold by the state to a Belgian arms dealer, and ended up in Britain. It fired 26 bullets in three seconds.

Seizures of such advanced weapons are still quite rare. Most gun crime in Britain involves handguns, usually converted blank-firing guns and, to a lesser extent, shotguns.

After many years of campaigning by the gun control lobby, a ban finally came into force in May 2004, making it illegal to own a blank-firing replica gun without a firearms licence. Before the ban, NCIS had repeatedly warned that more than half the illegally converted guns seized in Britain by police officers were Brococks, legal until the ban. The Brocock replica handgun has a feature very useful to criminals: the gas-fired pistol can be converted into a real gun by any dodgy backstreet gunsmith.

UK gun crime might not rival that of the US, but the problem is frightening and growing. There were more than 10,000 offences in England and Wales involving the use of firearms in 2003-04. Weapons such as Brococks were used in 2,150 offences, an increase of 18 per cent on the previous year.

Also on the rise is the number of victims shot: 440 people were seriously wounded by firearm in 2003-04, up five per cent on the previous year.

Even when handguns were banned, only around 3,000 of the 100,000 believed to have been in private hands before May 2004 have been handed in for destruction. The other 97,000 have disappeared.

David Raynes a former senior Customs investigator, believes there is now an ample underground supply of guns. "Guns can be had for £100 or so," he said. "I suspect the market is saturated in both Britain and Ireland. The real UK arms smuggling issue now is probably military explosives and detonators, to be used in future acts of terrorism."

DEADLY DEALER

Mark Sharpe, a 41-year-old criminal from Birchington, Kent is serving 10 years in jail after pleading guilty to four counts of importing firearms, silencers, ammunition and cocaine.

UK Customs officers at Coquelles in France stopped his car in February this year as he tried to re-enter Britain, and a search revealed four handguns concealed in boxes of Stella Artois lager. They were almost certainly destined for UK drug gangs. Sharpe was also carrying a loaded handgun and 750g of cocaine concealed in the insoles of his shoes.

Sharpe received a seven-year sentence for the firearms offences and three years for the drugs charges, the sentences to run consecutively.

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