

Border Line

Thanks to the decision by the Chair to suspend general debate, BMS delegates were able to turn their attention to the issue of border controls before the first morning session had concluded. The excellent working ‘non-paper’ by Mr. Federico Perazza of the Permanent Mission of Uruguay was the focus of delegate deliberations.

While respecting the range of government concerns articulated in yesterday’s sessions, NGO’s have their own complementary concerns on borders. As delegates know, national border issues are particularly sensitive in the many countries which were partitioned by colonial powers often with little regard for culture or geography. While states have a compelling interest in maintaining border security and have the primary responsibility to do so, there is also an urgent need to preserve the human dimensions of border access – the needs of families to be united, of cultures to be shared and expressed, of commerce to be conducted and promoted.

Delegates also know that border issues have been taken up at length at headquarters in other contexts, primarily in discussions focused on narcotics control and global terrorism. The considerable technical expertise available to member states through relevant UN bodies can help BMS delegates to assess the most relevant and appropriate technical means to enhance our ability to stem the flow of illicit arms across borders. This must be done in such a way to preserve the aforementioned human dimensions. We can and must find means of border control that allow us to screen illicit arms without impeding essential human interaction. Metaphorically speaking, we know how to keep dolphins out of our tuna nets, and we must do all that we can to ensure a similar outcome on small arms.

There was much productive discussion about how the UN can best support efforts to impede the traffic in illicit arms across borders. India, a nation with huge land and sea borders to control, was one of the countries that seemed to get it right. We need to invoke sophisticated technologies and robust enforcement to ensure that illicit arms are interdicted as effectively as possible. At the same time, we must do more to protect the myriad human activities for which accessible borders are a must.

There was some caution articulated at yesterday’s BMS about the scope of ‘shared responsibility’ when it comes to effective border control of illicit weapons, and it is important to maintain clarity on what the PoA requires in the way of collective support for national efforts. At the same time, through ECOWAS and other regional bodies, we are learning much about how countries with shared economic, social and cultural interests can support effective and humane border controls. We urge delegates to continue work on borders through the 2012 review conference and beyond, to consult widely with relevant UN agencies already involved with this work, and to learn all that we can from regional border control strategies and activities.