

“Fortaleciendo los compromisos para combatir el tráfico ilícito de Armas pequeñas y ligeras”

12 y 13 de diciembre de 2011

Quito, Ecuador

The control of illicit small arms and light weapons is a priority for many governments worldwide. In the Andean region, sources of such weapons vary widely. They are brought across borders beyond the reach of government control. They are diverted from the legal sale to illegal uses by criminals and non-state actors. They are made locally by rural people seeking to increase their security or make an extra bit of income.

Whatever the sources and circumstances, there is broad recognition in the international community of the insidious role that such weapons play in destabilizing security environments, increasing opportunities for criminality and insurgency, creating obstacles for participation in society by women and indigenous peoples, and undermining appropriate government authority.

Governments within and beyond the Andean region have taken stock of the need to address the grave problem of illicit weapons. In the context of the 2001 UN Programme of Action on Small Arms (PoA) review process as well as the current work towards formal Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) negotiations, states face the challenging work of finding consensus language on how to address related issues including stockpile management, weapons marking and tracing protocols, and ending diversion from the legitimate arms trade to illegitimate uses that fuel corruption, insurgency, criminality and terror.

As the UN prepares for major 2012 events including a review of progress on the PoA in its 10th year and the beginning of formal ATT negotiations, it is critically important that states contribute as much as they can to the success of these multi-lateral engagements. The states of the Andean region know they can do more together to control borders, dry up stockpiles, seize and destroy illicit weapons and bring their communications and intelligence on illicit small arms up to the highest international standards. Increasingly, these states are also able to provide technical support to assist governments eager to improve national marking, tracing, record keeping and other key arms-related tasks.

But more than anything else, 2012 offers opportunities for new leadership from states and regions – including the Andean states – that have wrestled with diverse challenges related to small arms proliferation and have both urgency and advice to offer other sectors of the international community that have not yet fully seized their own opportunities to end the scourge of illicit weapons.

The workshop organized in Quito in December by the Government of Ecuador in association with GAPW focused on the problem of illicit small arms in a manner that was part assessment and part leadership development. The Andean region has been a focus of intense activity on small arms by some key actors who were, gratefully, part of the implementation team for this workshop. Both the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey (SAS) and the Lima-based United Nations Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNLiREC) have already offered specific, robust programming designed to inform and inspire activity on illicit small arms – but also to create opportunities for Andean governments to use the authority they have earned in this area

to guide international policy and influence national and regional action in other global sectors.

This particular workshop, involving governments and civil society representatives from Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia and Peru was capably organized by the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs of the government of Ecuador with important assistance from the Ecuadorian mission to the United Nations in New York. Funding was provided in part by the government of Ecuador and by UN- based Global Action to Prevent War and Armed Conflict, though the bulk of the funds needed were generously provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Germany, which has also taken a keen interest in the policies, practices and leadership potential of the Andean region on small arms.

The combination of excellent organizing and timely funding made it possible for the workshop to be a truly regional affair including NGO experts on small arms policy and its relationship to development and gender policy. It also made it possible for the workshop to delve into many aspects of the small arms challenge. As noted often during the workshop, there are both transnational and domestic aspects of this problem. Uncontrolled borders and the presence of non-state actors engaging in broad-based criminal behavior is mirrored by the problem of street crime which is exacerbated by the presence of so many weapons beyond the reach of state regulation. These weapons inflict unpredictable violence that has many negative consequences in communities, including for women seeking their rightful places at the policy table.

In the pages that follow, both in the form of brief narrative and abundant appendices, a rich tapestry of research and policy will become apparent. There is much to highlight and much to appreciate. Two of the highlights were in the form of an evening event featuring four Ecuadorian ministers reflecting for their 'public' the ways in which illicit small arms undermines their work in security, in development and more. In addition, on the day following the workshop, the Ecuadorian Defense Ministry convened a moving ceremony during which as many as 25,000 weapons seized from illegal possession were destroyed. Watching the expressions on the faces of soldiers, it was clear that they saw this ceremony as less of a task and more of a patriotic duty. This reinforced the themes of the workshop – that illicit weapons are much more than an annoyance but are threats to both a stable security sector and to progress on a range of social development and participation responsibilities.

As for appreciation, there is much to share here as well. The workshop would not have taken place without the organizing skill of the Ministry of Defense – especially Veronica Gomez and Michelle Fiol – as well as Fernando Luque in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Special thanks is also due to Jose Eduardo Proano of the Permanent Mission of Ecuador to the United Nations in New York. The presence in Quito of Sabrina Pfiffner, an expert on the PoA from the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs, added an important multi-lateral dimension to our discussions. Dr. Detlev Wolter and his colleagues at the German Foreign Ministry in Berlin provided important financial support without which the workshop would not have been possible. Eric Berman and Sarah Parker of Small Arms Survey provided much conceptual guidance for our deliberations. Melanie Regimbal, Camilo Duplat and Amanda Cowl of UNLiREC continue to do extraordinary work with governments in the region and helped us in so many ways to fashion a workshop that could continue the momentum of the activities and guidance they are already providing.

This formidable array of skilled policymakers, officials and experts helped to ensure a successful workshop but, more importantly, are committed over the long term to helping the Andean region do more to address illicit arms and take greater leadership for progress on small arms in other regions. This is our primary hope for workshops such as these – not to break new ground but to sustain important momentum generated by others.

We recognize the degree to which the United Nations represents an uneven playing field where too much of the policy leadership is concentrated in too few hands. As the challenges for human security grow and expand, we must find ways to integrate more technical capacity, insight and experience from diverse parts of the globe. Workshops like this one represent one small step towards putting a wider array of best practices and new leaders into the global policy domain.