

Regional Perspectives on UN Efforts to Curb the Illegal Arms Trade

Key Concepts: Transparency, Verifiability and
Irreversibility

Key Outcomes: Promoting Human Rights,
Gender Sensitivity and Human Security

A Call to Action in the International Community

"The Security Council fails in its historic mission every day that it turns a blind eye to the rampant arms race. Each year, more than 42 billion dollars of conventional arms are sold to developing nations, where weak or non-existent democracies are incapable of satisfying the most basic needs of their peoples."

A Call to Action in the International Community

“Even in Latin America, which has never been more peaceful or more democratic, nearly 60 billion dollars will be assigned this year to military spending – this in a region with an average of seven years of schooling for its population and poverty that affects more than 200 million inhabitants.”

President Oscar Arias, United Nations Security Council, September 2009

Hopeful UN Initiatives

This year, the UN's member states have committed themselves to a series of ambitious meetings to more effectively honor their commitments to eliminating nuclear weapons, gender exclusion in peace processes, and the illicit trade in small arms and conventional weapons.

Hopeful UN Initiatives

- In a few short weeks, states will meet in New York to review and hopefully strengthen the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime.
- Later in June, states will convene for the 4th Biennial Meeting of States on Small Arms to review national progress in implementing the 2001 Program of Action.
- And in July the first serious negotiations towards an Arms Trade Treaty will begin.
- Hopes for progress are high, especially among communities impacted by armed violence.

The Biennial Meeting of States

At the 3rd Biennial Meeting of States in 2008, Latin American and Caribbean suggestions for ways to strengthen compliance with the 2001 Program of Action on Small Arms were vigorously and cooperatively promoted.

The Biennial Meeting of States

With support from the UN's Office of Disarmament Affairs (ODA), regional governments at the 3rd BMS called for more capacity building assistance to small states, more effective cooperation and engagement from civil society, and more regional workshops conducted to ensure that the security needs and aspirations of diverse global regions could be fully integrated into UN deliberations on these important matters.

The Biennial Meeting of States

Of these suggestions, the most progress to date has been in the area of regional meetings, which have found enthusiastic funding partners and which have engaged a wide range of regional actors – including the leadership of women's and development groups – on the impact of illicit arms sales.

Thanks to UN ODA and some key NGO and government partners, capacity assistance to small states intent on curbing illicit weapons has become more robust and effective.

The Biennial Meeting of States

The role of UN-based NGOs in this process remains uneven, with a few having considerable access and others relegated to the background, offering moral pressure but few problem solving skills to help diplomats better honor their disarmament commitments.

At the same time, relationships between UN-based NGOs and regional civil society organizations working on small arms must become more respectful and cooperative.

Towards an Arms Trade Treaty

And in July, after years of preparatory work by the Open Ended Working Group and Group of Interested States, negotiations will begin in earnest towards a formal, binding treaty to regulate the global trade in conventional weapons.

Arms to be covered under this treaty include all armaments listed in the UN Registry as well as small arms and light weapons.

Towards an Arms Trade Treaty

As noted by some of its prominent diplomatic sponsors, especially the government of the UK, the ATT is not a disarmament treaty per se, but rather a process to provide a regulatory framework for a sector that has long cried out for binding internationally agreed standards.

Costa Rica has been a leader both in calling for an ATT and in providing compelling evidence of the damage to human security that can be directly attributed to the unregulated arms trade.

Towards an Arms Trade Treaty

Instead, many NGOs, civil society partners, and even some governments see the ATT as an important first step towards eventually reducing the production of small arms and light weapons as well as drying up the vast stockpiles of existing weapons that have been secured illegally and cause great harm to community security and human development worldwide.

Towards an Arms Trade Treaty

Unlike the case of nuclear weapons, virtually all states have a direct and compelling interest in these Arms Trade negotiations. Among the most compelling agenda items are the need for clear protocols for marking and tracing weapons from their points of origin to their points of sale.

Towards an Arms Trade Treaty

Also critical in these negotiations is what the UN ODA calls 'end user certification.' This refers to assurances that state purchasers of small arms or other conventional weapons will not use those weapons to commit atrocity crimes or violate other human rights of their citizens.

Towards an Arms Trade Treaty

For many Latin American countries, of course, the core issue is less about illicit arms falling into the hands of abusers as illicit arms falling into the hands of criminals. Levels of gun violence in the poorer neighborhoods of Sao Paulo, for instance, easily rivals levels of violence from weapons as reported in the DRC or other heavily reported trouble spots.

Towards an Arms Trade Treaty

Whether about criminality, insurgency or community conflict, illicit weapons pose a direct and significant threat to human security in all its aspects.

As President Arias noted, we must not focus all our attention on the many thousands of victims who might die in a nuclear attack to the exclusion of those many thousands who die routinely through the use of illicit weapons.

A New Chance for Change

The Fourth BMS and the initial round of Arms Trade negotiations offer new opportunities for civil society to insist that UN officials and government policymakers place the security needs, aspirations, concerns and challenges of this region in sharp focus.

At the same time, Costa Rica's leadership at the UN – through the Human Security Network and other security venues – is essential to ensuring transparent, productive engagements and verifiable outcomes to these important meetings.

For Further Information

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