

Toward the Control of International Arms Transfers

Introduction by

Sergio Duarte
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs
United Nations



Conference on the Control of International Arms Transfers
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I wish to begin by expressing my gratitude to the Asociación para Políticas Públicas, the Consejo Argentino para las Relaciones Internacionales, and the Universidad de San Andrés for inviting me to participate in this conference.

I am especially grateful that the organizers appreciated the importance of including a representative of the United Nations at this event, given its many efforts since its creation to promote the development of multilateral norms in this field. The UN Charter contains mandates for both the General Assembly and the Security Council relating to the “regulation of armaments” (Articles 11, 26, and 47). In December 1946, the General Assembly adopted resolution 41, which recognized the general regulation and reduction of armaments as an important means to strengthen international peace and security. In February 1947, the Security Council adopted resolution 18, which created the Commission for Conventional Armaments.

While few of us today are satisfied with the world community’s accomplishments in fulfilling the ambitious goals of these early resolutions, I am certainly encouraged with the progress that we have been seen in recent years, as serious efforts have been underway at the national, regional, and multilateral levels to move this agenda forward.

At the UN, our member states came together in 2001 and adopted a Programme of Action against the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. This was truly a watershed event, as participating states have met in follow-up meetings every two years since, and we are certainly witnessing an expansion of regional and international efforts to curb this illicit trade and to address its tragic consequences for human security and economic development. In 2005, states made additional progress by adopting the International Tracing Instrument—a significant contribution to global efforts to control this illicit trade.

The world has also moved forward in developing norms against the production or use of conventional arms that are inherently inhumane. The 1980 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons today has five Protocols addressing weapons with non-detectable fragments, various types of mines and booby-traps, incendiary weapons, laser weapons, and explosive remnants of war. The day after tomorrow, over 100 states will meet in Oslo to sign a new convention outlawing the stockpiling or use of cluster munitions.

Other efforts have been underway to achieve agreement on an Arms Trade Treaty, a subject that will be addressed more specifically by other speakers in this panel. This initiative, launched initially by the United Kingdom, has since gained overwhelming support in the United Nations and has benefited from the strong support of Argentina and other co-sponsors of this initiative, including Australia, Costa Rica, Finland, Kenya, and Japan. Following this year’s report of an Expert Group on the treaty, the General Assembly decided to convene an “Open-ended Working Group” on this issue, with two sessions to be held per

year up to 2011. At long last, we are witnessing, in short, new life in the process of developing new multilateral norms on the transfer of conventional arms.

And needless to say, these efforts are materializing not a moment too soon, for armed violence in our world today is continuing to have devastating effects upon human security. It serves to prolong extreme poverty and frustrate the achievement of Millennium Development Goals. According to the World Bank, nothing undermines investment climates as armed insecurity. I am told that humanitarian organizations now spend up to 25 percent of their budgets on their own security.

We all know that there are legitimate uses for small arms and light weapons, for such purposes as in peacekeeping operations, domestic law enforcement, and national defence, while some countries allow their citizens to own such weapons—under controlled conditions—for protective or recreational purposes. Yet the illicit trade and the excessive accumulation of such weapons, and the higher risk of misuse and diversion, is undoubtedly leading to increased demands on states, arms manufacturers, and vendors to assume greater responsibilities in regulating this trade.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has repeatedly addressed the growing problem of illicit arms in circulation, and has stressed the lack of a normative framework to guide States in their decisions regarding arms transfers. On 19 November, he stated in a message to the Security Council that it was especially important to make progress in the area of transparency, in particular the contributions of the UN Register of Conventional Arms and the Standardized Instrument for Reporting Military Expenditures. He also stressed the need to pursue agreements that embody criteria of verification and irreversibility, and that are legally binding. Oscar Arias—former President of Costa Rica and Nobel Peace Laureate—initiated the Council’s public debate on this issue, amid new concerns over rising military expenditures and the excessive accumulation of arms.

The General Assembly’s decision to establish an “Open-ended working group” will help to ensure that the Arms Trade Treaty will be receiving the close attention it deserves over the next two years. While some commentators are frustrated with the slow rate of progress, this work is absolutely indispensable in building an international consensus necessary for this treaty to be fully multilateral in scope. There are still differences to resolve among states over such questions as the feasibility of such a treaty, the scope of its application (for example, which arms are covered?), and its draft parameters (for example, which specific human rights criteria will apply?).

Yet states are of course not the only actors in working for new controls in this field, as symbolized by the three non-state actors who have organized this present conference. Progress towards a concluding an Arms Trade Treaty will clearly require strong and

sustained support from civil society, including the 'Control Arms' campaign, as well as pressure from parliamentarians, trade unions, mayors, and other important actors.

The world community has welcomed the recent developments in the General Assembly and in the Security Council concerning the regulation of arms transfers, and the United Nations—as the central and indispensable forum for developing multilateral norms—stands ready to support all states in facilitating further progress in this important field.

I would like to close my remarks on a personal note. Much of my career has focused on achieving the global elimination of all weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons. Time and again, I have been proud of the leadership shown from within the region of Latin America in promoting the development of multilateral norms for weapons.

The Tlatelolco Treaty, for example, did not only create the world's first nuclear-weapon-free zone in a populated region, but it created a model that has influenced the creation of such zones in four additional regions, now covering virtually the entire Southern Hemisphere. States of this region have also strongly supported the negotiation of an Arms Trade Treaty. The Inter-American Convention on Transparency in Conventional Weapons Acquisitions was another important milestone, as was the Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials—which was the first major international convention in this field.

The UN's Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament, and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean has been actively working with states of the region to advance a wide range of goals in the fields of disarmament and the regulation of conventional arms.

I am therefore pleased, but not at all surprised, that we are meeting here today in Buenos Aires to consider ways and means for further progress in precisely these fields. Please accept my very best wishes in all your important work that lies ahead.