

Backgrounder

Small arms, as deadly as WMD

“The death toll from small arms dwarfs that of all other weapons systems – and in most years greatly exceeds the toll of the atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In terms of the carnage they cause, small arms, indeed, could well be described as ‘weapons of mass destruction’”. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

“Small arms” include hand guns, pistols, rifles, sub-machine guns, mortars, grenades and light missiles. “Light weapons” include heavy machine-guns, mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, anti-tank guns, and portable launchers of anti-tank missile.

Those weapons kill one person every two minutes somewhere in the world, both in nations plagued by civil strife (where most victims tend to be civilians), and through crime- or drug-related homicides, suicides and gun accidents.

These deaths are, in many cases, caused by illicit small arms and light weapons coming from a number of sources, including illicit brokering, weapons left over from conflicts, illicit manufacturing, leakages from military and police stockpiles, smuggling and theft.

A programme of action to save lives

To ensure that small arms and light weapons will be kept out of the wrong hands, the UN Member States unanimously adopted in 2001 a Programme of Action to combat the illicit trade in those weapons. The United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons (UNPoA) focuses on practical solutions, such as collecting and destroying illegal weapons, strengthening import and export controls, raising awareness on the effects of illegal weapons, improving the security and safety of weapons storage facilities and helping affected countries track down illegal transfers of small arms and the brokers involved. The Programme of Action has taken on a steady momentum: since 2001, more than 50 countries have reinforced their laws against the illegal trade in small arms, and more than 60 have collected and destroyed illegal small weapons.

The Review Conference to be held at UN Headquarters from 26 June to 7 July 2006, is first and foremost about eliminating illegal small arms in order to save more lives. The meeting offers an opportunity for all countries to renew their commitment to get rid of the illegal trade in small arms through accelerating the implementation of the Programme of Action worldwide. Concretely, the Conference will produce a document containing a strategy for a fuller implementation of the UN Programme of Action.

The Conference should also:

- ◆ add momentum for Governments to assist technically and financially affected countries to improve legislation and regulations governing the trade in these weapons, to collect, properly store and/or destroy accumulated illegal weapons;
- ◆ focus the international attention on a healthy global debate about guns and other small arms, allowing all sides of the question, pro-gun rights and advocates of gun control, to be heard, and;
- ◆ share best practices on the ground among the States and NGOs involved in fighting the illicit trade in small arms.

Preventing weapons from falling into the wrong hands

Assault rifles and other small arms and light weapons have become the weapons of choice in many internal conflicts waged around the world. They are weapons manufactured to military specifications for use as lethal instruments of war. Through illicit manufacturing and trade, these weapons often end up in the possession of organized crime syndicates, drug traffickers, warlords and other criminals. The Programme of Action and the 2006 Review Conference are not about outlawing the legal manufacture or trade of these weapons, nor their legal ownership. Their objectives are to prevent such weapons from being diverted into the illicit market.

The proliferation and easy availability of illicit small arms and light weapons has disastrous humanitarian consequences. Using illicit small arms, more than 300,000 child soldiers have lost their youth, participating in conflicts around the world. Millions of people have been displaced by conflicts fuelled by such weapons.

In the Programme of Action, States committed to tightening their controls over the import, export and transfers of small arms and light weapons, because without such controls it may be easy for weapons to be diverted from the legal trade into the illegal market. Improving controls over the legal trade diminishes the opportunity for weapons to fall into the wrong hands.

UN assists tracing and marking small arms

The adoption by the General Assembly of a critical new instrument on tracing and marking of small arms, which had been called for in the UNPoA (International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons, A/RES/60/81, December 2005) constitutes an important step forward in the efforts to develop global tools to curb the proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons.

Next Step: Addressing Illicit Brokering

A Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) is expected to be established by the Secretary-General to study the problem of illicit brokering and to make recommendations for action to prevent, combat and eradicate illicit brokering in small arms and light weapons. The Group is to begin work in November 2006.

United Nations Firearms Protocol

Transnational organized crime is a major threat to human security for many societies around the world. UN Member States adopted a legal convention in force since September 2003 to tackle cooperatively the many facets of this type of criminal activity: drug trafficking, trafficking in human beings, smuggling of migrants and money laundering. To supplement the convention on transnational organized crime, a

firearms protocol was adopted to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms, their parts and components and ammunition. This protocol, which came into force in July 2005, provides a useful tool for law enforcement in the 53 countries that ratified it.

Small arms and the UN Security Council

The Security Council is increasingly addressing the prevention of cross-border movement of small arms and combatants, and monitoring arms embargoes. The fact that every year the Council convenes open debates on the issue of small arms is a recognition that the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons poses a serious threat to peace and security.

In a recent report on small arms (S/2006/109, 17 February 2006), the Secretary-General welcomed the emphasis placed by the Security Council “on the importance of inter-mission cooperation with regard to the prevention of cross-border movement of arms and combatants, the illicit exploitation of natural resources, the implementation of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process and the monitoring of arms embargoes.” The report encouraged the Security Council “to continue its efforts aimed at identifying the links between the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons and the illicit exploitation of natural and other resources, as well as the trade in illegal drugs, and to develop innovative strategies to address this phenomenon.”

Following the adoption of the UNPoA, the Security Council invited the Secretary General to submit recommendations to address the proliferation of illegal small arms. Among his 12 recommendations were:

- ◆ Member States should enforce all Council resolutions on sanctions, including those imposing arms embargoes, in accordance with the UN Charter, and to bring their own national legislation into compliance with the Council’s measures on sanctions;
- ◆ The Council should continue its efforts aimed at identifying the links between the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons and the illicit exploitation of natural and other resources, as well as the trade in illegal drugs, and should develop innovative strategies to address this phenomenon;
- ◆ The Council should consider coercive measures against Member States that deliberately violate arms embargoes declared in respect of specific conflict areas.

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration

UN peacekeeping operations increasingly engage in activities related to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes as part of their mandates in post-conflict situations. Most recently, the Security Council included DDR provisions in the mandate of the United Nations Mission in the Sudan (UNMIS). Such programmes provide for the collection of weapons and ammunition and often for their destruction. In Sierra Leone, for example, the UN peacekeeping mission helped successfully disarm and demobilize some 75,000 combatants.

Humanitarian and Development Impact

Illegal small arms and light weapons are used every day to kill, maim and terrorize people in countries in conflict and elsewhere, notably through street crime. By fuelling conflict, crime and terrorism, the proliferation of such weapons undermines peace and greatly hinders development. This becomes a vicious circle as poverty and lack of development also tend to fuel conflict and the use of illegal small arms. A total of 22 of the 32 countries classified as having a “low human development” in UNDP’s Human Development Reports have suffered from conflicts since 1990.

In December 2005, the United Nations General Assembly called upon governments to address more effectively the humanitarian and development impact of the illicit manufacture, transfer and circulation of small arms and light weapons, and their excessive accumulation, in particular in conflict or post-conflict situations. The General Assembly (A/RES/60/68) encouraged States to integrate armed violence prevention programmes into their national development strategies, including in poverty reduction. The GA invited States and international/regional organizations to render technical and financial assistance, such as small arms funds, to support the measures contained in the Programme of Action on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms. The resolution underlines the roles that women and women's organizations could play in small arms disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes as well as the importance of addressing the needs of women and girl combatants and dependants in DDR programmes.

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