

Draining the existing pool of weapons

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I am Pamela Cole, the national network coordinator of the West African Network for Peace Building (WANEP) in Gambia, a member of IANSA.

Draining the existing pool of weapons is a significant part of the comprehensive effort to reduce the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Information about exact numbers of weapons, and their movement is difficult to gauge with accuracy due to the nature of both the illicit trade, but also poor transparency from States and other holders of weapons.

However, the Small Arms Survey estimates that there are some 640 million weapons in the world, it is therefore important to work to reduce the large volume of excess guns in circulation.

This is critical as small arms can pose a dangerous threat when misused, often being 'recycled' from one place to another, from one war zone to another, and criminal to criminal.

Firearms kept in the home can also contribute to suicides and accidents, and increase the lethality of intimate partner violence.

Poorly managed stockpiles of state-owned weapons are a source of small arms for the illicit market. One dramatic example is that of Albania, where military depots were raided during riots in 1997, resulting in 524,000 weapons and 1,500,000,000 rounds of small arms ammunition being looted by civilians.

In addition, police arsenals are also a source of weapons moving into illicit circulation. Police and military stockpiles can often end up being used to perpetrate crime and violent conflict.

The World Bank estimates there is a significant chance of violent conflict reigniting within five years of a peace agreement. Disarmament efforts are an essential part of violence prevention and small arms control, both after war and in societies experiencing high levels of armed violence and crime.

Current efforts to reduce the existing stock of guns and ammunition are insufficient to stem the flood of new and recycled weapons.

How does the Program of Action address this issue?

In an attempt to address the problem, the Program of Action mentions weapons collection as a specific part of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) measures.

Gambia, where I come from, is a small country in West Africa that fortunately has not experienced violent conflict, but is surrounded by countries that are experiencing or emerging from long periods of war and turmoil.

Sierra Leone today, as the Chair of this meeting reminded us on Monday, is an example of how effective coordinated DDR and weapons control processes can be and provides a benchmark in many regards for other IANSA presentation to 2006 PrepCom

peace-building processes. Thousands of weapons were taken out of circulation permanently, and in exchange thousands of Sierra Leoneans have benefited from new health clinics, sporting facilities and schools.

Porous borders, outdated national regulations, increasing local craft production, and the impacts of years of illicit weapons flowing through and over borders in West Africa is taking its toll on nations such as mine.

My organisation is currently implementing a regional project involving four nations – Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Guinea Conakry. The goal of which is to reduce small arms and light weapons proliferation through sensitisation and capacity building programs.

This project is divided into 3 phases:

1. capacity building amongst local communities through conducting training on weapons related issues such as gender and guns, and the impacts on sustainable development;
2. sensitisation of local community, particularly women and youth;
3. Voluntary surrendering of arms in exchange for a development phase such as a health centre and a school.

Right now, WANEP is moving into the second, and most important, phase of the project. The gender dimension is an integral part of all our activities, and this project in particular. Women are consistently left out of peace and violence reduction initiatives, even though they are dramatically affected by armed conflict and gun violence.

WANEP seeks to bridge this gap, by providing women with opportunities and access to fully participate and play a vital role in various disarmament and weapons control processes, including DDR programs.

As States move towards the all important Review Conference we urge the consideration of the following policy suggestions:

1. Adopt, update or strengthen national legislation to seize and destroy surplus and obsolete small arms and light weapons, after their details have been duly recorded. This is crucial to keep guns from falling into the wrong hands. It is important to include ammunition stockpiles in this focus as the various ammunition depot explosions through 2005 showed us the danger of poorly managed stockpiles.
2. Incorporate weapons collection and stockpile management programs into peacebuilding strategies, to avoid societies emerging from violent conflicts suffering relapses.
3. Ensure that a long-term goal of post-conflict disarmament is to establish a norm within society that possession of guns is a responsibility that carries a range of obligations. Unauthorised and excessive firearms possession is unacceptable in nations recovering from war.
4. Ensure that disarmament processes are inclusive and designed in collaboration with the affected community, particularly prioritising the implementation of Article 13 of Security Council Resolution

1325, .calling upon 'all those involved in the planning for DDR to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and the needs of their dependents

5. Design collection programs for small arms that emphasise anonymity and provide collective incentives where possible, as in the case of our current project in Gambia.

Thank you.