

2006: Bringing the global gun crisis under control

Summary

Too many casualties

A thousand people die every day because of guns, and many more are seriously injured. If the death, injury and disability resulting from small arms were categorised as a disease, we would view it as an epidemic. Guns are a man-made vector of disease and are manifestly bad for human health. No country is immune.

When guns are more easily available, people are more likely to die and be injured, whether in war, on the streets, or in the home. While guns may not be the root cause of violence, they multiply it significantly, increasing the lethality of a situation.

Too many guns

There are 640 million guns in the world, one for every ten people on earth. Another 8 million guns are manufactured every year, along with 10-14 billion units of ammunition, enough to kill everyone on earth twice over.

The annual value of the gun trade is \$4 billion, of which \$1 billion may be unauthorised or illicit. This is vastly outweighed by the full costs of gun violence, (which include not only medical treatment but lost earnings and economic disruption.)

Too many loopholes

While there are a number of national and regional agreements to control the movement of small arms, global controls do not exist.

- There are no agreed global standards for governments deciding whether to authorise an arms export or transfer.
- There are no international guidelines to assist states in regulating gun ownership among their own citizens.
- There is no legally binding treaty to control the activities of arms brokers
- There is no legal requirement for governments to maintain records linking guns to their location (whether military stockpile, police depot or civilian home), nor any requirement for governments to cooperate with other countries in tracing guns used in crime or war.

Guns must be kept out of the hands of those who are likely to misuse them, whether it is an armed rebel group committing atrocities during a civil war, a police force that uses live ammunition to suppress public demonstrations, or an individual with a history of domestic violence. Because guns do not respect borders, local and national measures – while important – will never be enough. No government on its own can stem this epidemic.

UN Small Arms Review Conference 2006

The world has been slow to recognise this crisis and to take action. It took until 2001 before the first global meeting to address the small arms trade took place at the United Nations. Following bitter negotiation and many compromises, the result was the Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons in all its Aspects (PoA). It was not legally binding, which means governments are not required to comply. While the need to restrict supply was openly discussed, questions of demand and misuse were mostly left out.

June 2006 will see a global meeting on small arms at the UN in New York, at which the PoA will be reviewed. It is an opportunity to reframe the debate about small arms as a global crisis and demand that the international community address it as such. Without concerted effort, however, this meeting is likely only to review pieces of a jigsaw, without reaching a new commitment to the steps which must lie ahead.

What governments must agree to do at the UN small arms conference

- Set out global criteria which to weapons transfers where there is a clear risk they may be used to abuse human rights, fuel conflict, or impede development. (Such criteria would form a springboard for negotiations to begin on an international Arms Trade Treaty later this year.)
- Recognise the importance of regulating guns in civilian hands through registration and licensing
- Integrate development projects with activities to prevent small arms violence
- Provide assistance to the survivors of small arms violence

What is likely to happen?

The vast majority of governments want to reaffirm and elaborate the commitments they made in 2001. Recognising that the problem needs urgent international cooperation, they support the inclusions of measures to improve the effective implementation of the PoA, such as those proposed by IANSA above.

If the view of the majority prevails, the conference will be a major contribution to reducing armed violence worldwide. Unfortunately, one of the main obstacles in the small arms process is the distorted interpretation of consensus that is applied. Consensus should mean general agreement to a decision, with objections being heard and accommodated where possible. Here, however, consensus is simply another name for allowing a reluctant state to impose its veto.

This interpretation of consensus is inherited from Cold War-era arms control, primarily concerning the strategic arsenals and armaments of a few major rival powers; consensus is important when there are just a few nuclear weapon-owning states. By contrast, small arms are present in every country and manufactured by half of them, and there is no rational basis for allowing the objections of one or two countries to block progress on measures to make the citizens of 190 other countries safer.

The stakes are high – the UN meeting in June is the last chance before the next global small arms meeting, probably in 2011, to make decisions that are needed. If this opportunity is missed, another five years means another 1.8 million people dead and millions more injured before the subject can be discussed again at global level.

What is the International Action Network on Small Arms?

IANSA is a global network of more than 700 civil society organisations including democracy campaigners, human rights activists, development agencies, women's groups, religious organisations, doctors, humanitarian workers, victim support groups, academics and lawyers. IANSA members are working toward controls on the international arms trade and for policies to make people safer from gun violence.

The involvement of people from so many different sectors means that IANSA's thinking and action are grounded not only in research and information, but also in the direct experience of our members on the frontline. Whether they're in the slums of Manila, the battlefields of Congo or the streets of Medellín, they see the destructive reality of gun proliferation first-hand.

Since 2001 IANSA has coordinated the voices of civil society at the United Nations meetings on small arms.

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