

**Building a network for small arms control in MERCOSUR:  
Workshop Report  
Hosted by the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences  
Buenos Aires, Argentina  
June 19 – 20, 2003**



INTERNATIONAL ALERT



## I. OVERVIEW

The regional context of armed violence in MERCOSUR countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay) includes the following general characteristics: an emphasis on urban violence and criminality; increasing privatisation of security agencies and a lack of effective control over their operations; an increase in armed violence related to drug trafficking; problems with corruption in security and justice institutions; legislative loopholes and lack of operational mechanisms to enforce compliance.

In order to reduce problems related to armed violence and SALW trafficking, actors in the region have broadly suggested the following lines of action: increasing controls on private security agencies; introducing legislation on stockpiles controls at the national and regional levels, including regulations on seizures, stockpiling and destroying excess stocks; articulation of SALW issues in a broader context in order to galvanise public support (for example, security as a precondition to human rights/human security/development); and the need for convergent security policies at the regional level in order to facilitate information sharing and cooperation.

This last point merits special attention, especially as the current context appears favorable for pushing for increased regional SALW controls in MERCOSUR. In Argentina and Brazil, the two most important arms producing countries in the region, recent political changes have left a space open to discuss SALW controls and the issue is squarely on the political agenda; both countries have demonstrated they are in favor of strengthening of the role of MERCOSUR. In Paraguay, a new law restricting guns sales to individuals was passed recently, and in Bolivia a bill of law is being examined to fill in the legislative gap on gun control. Internal demand for security coincides with the international agenda.

In light of these factors, International Alert's Security and Peacebuilding Programme decided to organise a meeting with IANSA and Viva Rio with a specific focus on small arms advocacy in MERCOSUR, inviting members of civil society organizations, the media and members of parliament from the region to participate. The following is a report on the main conclusions and actions from this meeting, held June 19 – 20 in the facilities of FLACSO Argentina in Buenos Aires.

## II. WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES

- 1) Set the agenda for **legislative changes AND the implementation of existing norms** at the national, regional and international levels, with the goal of **convergent laws** in MERCOSUR.
- 2) Push for greater **cooperation between NGOs and government**, with the goals of overcoming historic antagonism and changing perception that firearms control is exclusively a military/state security issue, as well as increasing transparency and information-sharing.
- 3) Set conditions to **raise awareness** of the issues around armed violence **among civil society, the media and government**, with the goal of identifying partners within each group and opening the dialogue around possible ways forward.
- 4) Strengthen **national and regional mechanisms** for increasing small arms control, including a pushing for creation of a special parliamentary commission, reinforcing the MERCOSUR Working Group on Small Arms, etc.

### **III. SUMMARY OF THE SESSIONS**

#### **A. Mechanisms for SALW control in MERCOSUL:**

Bill Godnick of International Alert and Pablo Dreyfus of Viva Rio gave presentations on the main conclusions of recent reports looking specifically at mechanisms for small arms control in the region. In general, they found a lack of coordination between competent institutions at the state level (regulation is scattered, information is not shared, etc.), noting that the Ministry of Defence is responsible for firearms control in the majority of countries. They also found that where civil society organisations are more active on SALW issues, governments are also more active, and that most successful programmes have been implemented at the local level, involving civil society. Pablo gave an overview of relevant regional mechanisms, and Bill pointed out the need to strengthen these mechanisms and introduce measures to monitor their implementation.

#### ***Relevant mechanisms***

Inter-American Convention; CICAD Model Regulations, OAS/CICAD; UN Programme of Action; UN Firearms Protocol; MERCOSUR Security Information Exchange Mechanism (SISME); MERCOSUR Group of Ministers of Interior; and MERCOSUR Arms Working Group.

#### ***Recent initiatives at regional levels***

Progress was noted in the following areas: proposed legislation for SALW controls in Bolivia; new legislation (1910/2002) in Paraguay: illegal to sell firearms to tourists; gun destructions and reform of weapons stockpiles facilities; role of IANSA's regional coordinator; website [www.desarme.org](http://www.desarme.org) as a forum for exchange of information, research and to improve communications. SALW legislation backtracked in the case of the disposition 187/2002 in Argentina, which took away previously approved restrictions for obtaining firearms licenses. It was also noted that though the creation of the SISME is an important step to improve information sharing and convergent legislation, it is still not operational, and thus constitutes an important target for advocacy.

#### **B. The role of Parliaments:**

As was noted in plenary, there is a noted opposition to gun control at the parliamentary level in many MERCOSUR countries, based on long-standing beliefs that gun control is a question of state security, and the desire not to interfere with the profits of the gun industry. Participants noted that parliaments may be more likely to act on firearms control legislation immediately following a tragic event or if civil society can demonstrate its concern for this issue.

Members of parliament and others (Carlos Iparraguirre, Argentina; Antonio Rangel Bandeira, Brazil; Santos Ramírez Valverde, Bolivia; Hugo Corrales Compagnucci, Paraguay; and Daisy Tourné, Uruguay) made presentations on the political situation with regard to SALW control in their countries.

#### ***Joint action: parliamentarians and civil society***

The discussion raised the need to socialise the problem in a broad human security context and raise the profile of possible solutions, generating a public debate and media coverage (to which parliaments are likely to respond). In particular, participants emphasised the need work together in the following areas: reform penal codes to implement specific punishments for illegally obtaining, transporting, using, carrying and commercializing firearms; seek information on pressing for parliamentary control on firearms legislation at the national level, taking the Parliamentary Forum in Central America as a possible example.

Participants felt that parliamentarians should: transmit information, create the agenda in public opinion and not just reflect it, legislate in favour of gun control, exercise parliamentary control, promote regional integration, and promote public debate and mechanisms of public audiences at the parliamentary level. At the same time, civil society should: interact with parliamentarians, share knowledge and provide information, raise consciousness at state level for the fulfillment of its fundamental duty: provide security.

**C. Case study: Argentine-made weapons diverted illegally to Rio de Janeiro:**

The example of recent bilateral action to push for action on Argentine weapons used illegally and confiscated by police in Rio de Janeiro can serve as an advocacy model, for its successful efforts in three core areas: regional cooperation between NGOs (Viva Rio in Brazil and Espacios in Argentina); mediastrategy that placed the issue in the public eye with major stories in TV, electronic and print media in both countries; work with key parliamentarians who initiated legal investigations based on information provided by NGOs and promoted by the media.

Panel was presided by Gabriel Conté from the NGO Espacios in Argentina, Pablo Dreyfus of Viva Rio in Brazil, and Carlos Iparraguirre an Argentine legislator who requested the official investigation on the case in Argentina.

**D. The Andean-Amazonian-MERCOSUR relationship:**

Due to the particular problem of drugs and firearms trafficking between the Mercosur/Andean/Amazonian regions, organizers felt it important to include Colombian speakers in the agenda.

According to Eduardo Marino, a researcher for International Alert based in Colombia, the recycling of weapons with the narcodollars follows an economic cycle: a highly prohibited and highly lucrative market (drugs) produces excessive revenues recycled in a very liberal and regulated market (guns), which happens to serve for the defence of the interest of the first market (security, territory). Eduardo mentioned that one result of the protracted civil war in Colombia is that firearms legislation does not target all angles of the problem (such as crime, which now causes the largest portion of homicides in the country), but rather focuses on strategic interests related to the war. For example, in Colombia, legislation does not give the express right to have or carry firearms under specific conditions, but rather gives the right to ask the state for permission to have a firearm, in an effort to restrict access to those groups opposed to the government.

At the conclusion of the panel, participants recognised the need to: increase the focus on border controls in the Amazon region where most guns are trafficked between the two sub-regions (Andes/Amazon and MERCOSUR); make more explicit the link between gun proliferation and narcobusiness; link SALW controls with public health and development, to circumvent problems of political interests with regard to disarmament.

**E. Evidence-based advocacy:**

Pablo Dreyfus of Viva Rio and José María Ramírez Fernandes of Espacios presented on the need for research to inform advocacy efforts. The lack of reliable information in Latin America is a notorious problem for SALW advocacy. Government bodies, in general, do not have a culture of keeping accurate records, and are generally unwilling to share data.

NGOs and research institutes can play an important role in overcoming this gap by seeking partnerships with governments to find information related to gun violence. Research serves to deconstruct myths, guide public opinion, and identify real causes,

vectors and symptoms. This will help to generate long-term policy proposals based on the real characteristics of the problem. Information should identify, for example: who dies? under what circumstances and where? what is the instrument of death? what is the relationship between the victim and the assailant? what are the days and hours where crimes are most frequently committed.

### ***Methodological recommendations***

The group agreed that it would be advantageous to work with a multidisciplinary team: lawyers, anthropologists (qualitative data, possibility for participatory assessments), sociologist, doctors, journalists, etc. They could also involve governments in participatory assessments to encourage them to become involved and active on the issue. They also agreed that research *per se* is not the objective, rather information that can be synthesised and used to create public awareness or pressure for political change. The websites of [www.desarme.org](http://www.desarme.org) and [www.iansa.org](http://www.iansa.org) were cited as two places to seek and deposit information on SALW research and advocacy.

### **F. The role of communication:**

For a large part of public opinion, the media is a depository of truth; therefore, it is important to get them to articulate the case for gun control. Media are also a fundamental agent in setting public agenda and influencing governments priorities. The gun industry has been successful at marketing: guns are marketed in a number of forums, and the products are associated with sexiness, machismo, power, social inclusion. Strong efforts must be made to counter these messages. Gustavo Guidobono from the communications NGO ALUDEC in Uruguay and Gabriel Conte of Desarme.org in Argentina presented on this issue.

This session raised the importance of recognising communications as a fundamental concept in small arms advocacy, something that should be given as much priority as research or activism. Suggestions for maximizing communications efforts included integrating journalists and publicity people to NGO staff, channeling disperse communications efforts through unified symbols and campaigns and seeking to broadcast/disseminate publicity efforts through region-wide mediums.

## **IV. FOLLOW UP**

- Continue work to streamline and implement relevant national legislation, according to conclusions/recommendations outlined above, with the ultimate goal of regionally convergent legislation. Monitor and pressure government compliance with existing regional and international mechanisms (see list above). Specific attention should be placed on: illicit trafficking, brokers, illicit manufacturing, marking and tracing, common definition of crimes for extradition purposes, registry, control of military stocks and destination of seized weapons.
- Raise the profile of the issue of SALW proliferation and misuse by including the issue within a broader context of human security, human rights, or development. Push for public hearings and legal debates on issues relating to firearms controls to increase public awareness on the issue.
- Organise a follow-up meeting with a stronger emphasis on parliamentarians to improve methods for discussing and debating laws with civil society participation. Establish from this meeting a working group/network of committed individuals from government, research/activism and communications fields.
- Continue to discuss the possibility of creating a political instrument or mechanism for parliamentary control at the regional level, following further studies and inquiries to evaluate such a mechanism's effectiveness and necessity.

- Role of IANSA regional coordination: coordination of activities, facilitate exchange of information, join forces, help in fundraising.

## **V.     **OUTPUTS****

- New actors involved in network and actively contributing to joint action at regional level in MERCOSUR;
- New members of IANSA;
- Resource database with information and contacts in each country on the following: government officials and government bodies concerned with SALW control, journalists and communications specialists with demonstrated interest in the issue, and researchers and relevant research. This will be useful in coordinating advocacy efforts around the UN BMS in July 2003. It can also be made available through the network or through the Desarme.org and IANSA websites, to facilitate wider participation in SALW advocacy efforts.

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