

First Committee (Disarmament and International Security): The Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons



JPHMUN 2011 Background Guide



1. Introduction

The nonproliferation, or “the prevention of an increase or spread” (New Oxford American Dictionary), of small arms and light weapons (SALW) across the globe is a major ongoing issue for the United Nations. In the First Committee of the General Assembly, delegates will discuss, debate, and resolve potential resolutions surrounding the elimination of small arms and light weapons. Like weapons of mass destruction (WMD), SALW are a humanitarian threat and pose a significant problem for the international community.

By definition, the term “small arms and light weapons” refers to small arms “intended for use by military and civilians” and light arms as “weapons generally intended for military use” (Hari 19). Small arms can be revolvers, pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns, while light weapons encompasses heavy machine guns, hand-held under barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, anti tanks guns and other similar weaponry (Hari 20). The cost of these weapons to humanity is undeniable. Small arms and light weapons play pivotal roles in all modern-day conflict and unrest. According to the 2009 Small Arms Survey (SAS), somewhere between 60-90 percent of all conflict deaths are due to firearms. The SAS estimates that in 2003 alone this resulted in somewhere between 80, 000 and 108, 000 deaths. Because much of this conflict occurs in areas of the world with sub-standard healthcare infrastructure and humanitarian aid, there is also the potential for far greater indirect death instances (Hari 22).

The presence of small arms and light weapons in conflict zones also impedes humanitarian and developmental action. If the security in an area that needs humanitarian assistance is perceived to be poor then erosion of health assistance, access to necessities and developmental assistance is often the end result. The Small Arms Survey also points to the proliferation of small arms as a threat to “a community’s physical, economic, social, political and cultural security” (Small Arms Survey, 2004). It found that in 2004, there were 200, 000 non-conflict related deaths as a result of firearms. It also concluded that 20 percent of the world’s homicides were committed via handgun.

The purely economic cost of gun violence is just as serious. A gunshot wound costs three times that of a stab wound or similar cut. In states with high instances of gun violence the cost to the healthcare system is considerable. Firearm injuries cost Brazil and Columbia \$88 million and

\$38 million US dollars per year, respectively. Furthermore, “firearms injuries also tend to affect young, potentially productive segments of the population”, meaning that there is significant cost in the lost potential of these victims (although this number is hard to estimate). (Small Arms Survey, 2009)

2. Areas to Target in Combating SLW

There are several areas that need to receive attention in the reduction of small arms and light weapons trade. These areas include, but are not limited too, SALW production, storage and stockpiling, international transparency, and the proliferation of man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

The production of a majority of small arms and light weapons occurs in legitimate, legal facilities. Production occurs in a range of factories, from state-owned establishments to small, private specialist shops (Hari 23). Weapons producers are becoming increasingly globalized which means that new countries, such as Brazil, Israel, Australia, and South Africa are all becoming high-capacity producers along with the traditional European and North American manufactures (Small Arms Survey, 2004). Moreover, the persistent development of new technology means that armies are constantly looking to revamp their supply of weaponry, much of which are improvements made on small arms like pistols, and revolvers. This creates a surplus of older weapons, which are commonly lost to illegitimate groups.

The security of the storage of small arms and light weapons is also crucial. In particular, state stockpiles are often the most vulnerable to loss to outsiders or pilferage by members of armed forces (Hari 25). Of the estimated 875 million firearms in the world, the Small Arms Survey concludes that 226 million are in law enforcement stockpiles worldwide (Small Arms Survey, 2007) Furthermore, there are over one million civilian firearms stolen each year annually. When one considers that stolen firearms are more likely to be involved in crime, it is crucial that stockpiles be as secure as possible.

Transparency of firearm transfers is also vital to security and combating proliferation. The UN Commodity Trade Statistics Database and the National Arms Exports are two of the tools used to monitor the flow of firearms. They are both far from perfect, and vary substantially in comprehensiveness (Hari 24).

The parity of firearms statistics and reporting also varies significantly from country to country. As the production capacity of many countries becomes larger, there is little sign that the reporting of firearms transfers is keeping up. One solution to this problem is the Small Arms Trade Transparency Barometer, which analyzes the legitimacy and usefulness of countries reports. The Barometer is based on national export reports the U.N. Register of Conventional Arms, and submissions to the U.N. Commodity Trade Statistics Database. The Barometer finds Switzerland, the U.K., the U.S, Germany, the Netherlands, Serbia and Norway to be the most transparent, while scoring both Iran and North Korea at zero, rendering them the least transparent. (Hari 24)

The diversion of weapons from the legal to illegal realms is a common occurrence and happens through several different manners:

- Government supplies to non-state groups;
- Violation of arms embargoes;
- Violation of end-user agreements (an End-User Certificate is a government document aimed at ensuring that the purchaser of a firearm is also the final recipient of the weapon);

- Ant-trade (a slow trickle of weaponry over boarders);
- Diversion from government stockpiles via theft
- Battlefield seizures and war plunder. (Small Arms Survey, 2009)

A more recent development is the prevalence of MANPADS (Man-portable air defense systems) and IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices). Both are types of weaponry that require fewer resources to acquire and less knowledge to operate. For instance, these types of weapons can be produced in smaller factories that are able to do so cheaply and efficiently. Because the factories are smaller, they are less regulated and can provide them to smaller groups with less detection. This, in light of the fact that both MANPADS and IEDS are considerably more lethal than other SALW, they are an increasing significant concern. (Small Arms Survey, 2009)

Another considerable factor is the overwhelming prevalence of young men involved in conflict involving small arms and light weapons. For example, the 2009 Small Arms Survey notes young men “represent a disproportionately high share of the perpetrators and victims of gun-related, lethal violence.” The 2006 version of the survey indicates that young men aged 15 to 29 account for 50% of homicide victims globally (Small Arms Survey, 2009).

Arms brokering is also receiving increasing amounts of attention. Defined as “middlemen who organize arms transfers between two or more parties,” brokers are not implicitly committing illegal acts. However, studies have proven that illicit diversions of weapons are commonly arranged via arms brokerage. This is an area that needs significant attention, as only 40 countries worldwide currently have enacted regulations over arms brokers. (Small Arms Survey, 2009)

3. Action to Date

The nonproliferation initiative is a relatively recent focus for the United Nations. It was at the 50th session of the 1996 General Assembly where the first resolution was adopted. It recognized that complete disarmament faces a serious roadblock in the form of small arms (UNPSD, 2009). In 1997, the first report of the Secretary General on small arms was published, and subsequently, it was followed by a second report in 1999. Both were important as they defined small weapons and recognized the close relationship between small weapons and increased incidences of internal conflicts and high levels of crime and violence. The second report raised alarming findings, claiming that small arms “are increasingly lethal, are relatively cheap, easily portable and concealable and, in most cases, require minimal maintenance and logistical support, and therefore they can be operated relatively easily” (UN GA, 1999).

These reports lead to the “Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects.” The Program of Action (PoA), was developed by the 2001 United Nations Conference on the Illicit Traffic in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects. The Programme of Action is non-binding and open to interpretation by national governments (UNPSD, 2009). Its essence is based in the assignment of responsibility to national governments to solve the problems related to small arms misuse and proliferation (Hari 20). Measures included in the PoA include:

1. Strengthening of national regulations governing the production and transfer of small arms;
2. Ensuring that manufacturers mark all weapons, allowing for tracing of seized weapons;
3. Improving the system of end-use certification to diminish the risk of diversion and illicit trafficking;
4. Encouraging the destruction of weapons;

JPHMUN 2011

5. Increasing security of small arms stocks;
6. Co-operating with the UN system to ensure the effective implementation of Security Council arms embargos;
7. Encouraging co-operation with relevant international and regional organizations. (Small Arms Survey, 2002)

Despite the advancement made in confronting the issue of SALW, there were criticisms of the program. The final document does not develop commitments towards negotiating an international instrument for marking and tracing weapons. It does not deal with the issues of increasing transparency in the legal production, stockpiling and trade in small arms, controlling transfers to non-state actors, and similar more defined actions. That being said, the UN has hailed the PoA as a successful initiative, pointing to several improvements in the international system. For instance, three legally binding agreements in Africa have been introduced, promoted and sponsored by the PoA (UNDPI, 2009). Meanwhile at the state level, more than 50 countries have strengthened their national legislation on gun control and there have been various disarmament campaigns in at least 60 countries. (UNDPI, 2009).

The program also outlined the need for follow-up meetings on the issue. The First Biennial Meeting of States to Consider the Implementation of the PoA was held in 2003 in New York, and a second in 2005 (UNPSD, 2009) and there was a review of the PoA's progress in 2006. Despite the fact that the current PoA is not legally binding, and is widely criticized for being unable to force countries into "real action," the review was unable to reform the document to further enforce the Program of Action (UNSARC, 2006).

In the following 2 years initiatives by the United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), the UN Coordinating Action of Small Arms (UNCASA) and the Department for Disarmament Affairs have based their activities around the implementation of the Program of Action, and the coordination of an "international instrument on marking and tracing small arms and light weapons"(UNSARC, 2006).

In 2008, a resolution entitled "the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects" was adopted by the General Assembly. It summarized the multiple features to small arms proliferation and control, and expressed concern over the effect small arms have on poverty and underdevelopment. It placed additional urgency on the need to curb proliferation.

4. Proposed Actions

International Small Arms Controlling Standards (ISACS)

ISACS is a project funded by the UN and run by UNCASA, and its goal is to identify internationally accepted practices and standards for the curbing the proliferation of small arms (McCarthy, 2009). These standards are intended to be much like those developed to target land mines. It was expected to be completed by September of 2010, but final documents have not been officially published as of December 2010. A report on the subject states "it is widely acknowledged that SALW control interventions have now reached the level of 'maturity' necessary to enable the development of a harmonized and holistic response to the numerous challenges posed by the uncontrolled proliferation of SALW" (UNCASA, 2009). The finished document will contain standards, which although not legally binding, will attempt to harmonize the Program of Action, and inducing global strides in curtailing small arms and light weapons proliferation (UNCASA, 2009).

When it comes to standards and regulations, it is important that producers are accounted for. Major countries such as the United States, Russia, China, Canada, Australia, and the European Union countries produce most of the small arms and light weapons. Therefore, it is crucial that stricter regulations are implemented and enforced by these countries regarding the export of these products.

Disarmament falls into three categories:

1. Civilian weapons collection and destruction;
2. State disarmament, whereby governments reduce their own arsenals;
3. Disarmament of non-state actors, which aim to reduce armed violence.

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration initiatives are a crucial piece to improvement in post-conflict zones. The process is designed to not only remove SALW from an area, but also discharge the combatants from pertinent armed forces and return them to civilian status (UNDDR, 2009). Other solutions that are recommended by some experts are incentive-based programs for collection of small arms through civilians (Small Arms Survey, 2009). This is something that needs to be examined and discussed the international level.

5. Bloc Positions

The issue of small arms and light weapons proliferation is one that has implications that don't follow borders, which means that traditional blocs are often less relevant. That being said, regional and sub-regional bodies often work together for small arms and light weapons control. (Hari 29) It is important to understand your country's position on the issue, and relate it to the rest of the world.

Africa

African Nations stand to benefit as much, if not more than the rest of the world from SALW nonproliferation. The development and general stability of the continent depends of reducing the number of weapons used in conflict. The Economic Community of West African States in particular is susceptible to illegal arms trade, as it attempts to recover from political and economic turmoil. By minimizing the impact of SALW on malicious armed groups, West Africa can avoid furthering the volatility in the region, much of which is fueled by illegal small arms production, trade and use. (Hari 30) Noteworthy agreements within the African Union include the Nairobi Protocol, The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on the Control of Firearms, Ammunition and Other Related Materials and the Bamko Declaration on the African Common Position on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light weapons. (Hari 30)

Europe

It is a common misconception that all small arms are dealt through small, developing countries. This is not the case, as 5 permanent members to the Security Council make up for 88 percent of the world's conventional arms exports (Hillier 3). The European Union recognizes the threat small arms and light weapons pose, and has taken several measures to combat the issue. The EU has adopted a 2005 strategy committing all members to combat weapons accumulation and trafficking, a Code of Conduct on Arms Exports, and police, customs and judiciary action within the EU. It also supports the legally binding International Arms Trade Treaty. (Hari 30)

In particular, Spain, Britain and Italy have been criticized for transfers of arms and security equipment to Columbia, a country with a record stained with human rights violations.

JPHMUN 2011

Further exporting to countries that are either in conflict or where human rights are not held accountable to international standard continues to take place. Loopholes and loose interpretation of the Code of Conduct has allowed EU companies to export to countries such as Israel, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Pakistan and Sierra Leone (Hughes). The European Union countries need to focus on tightening the language used in the Code of Conduct, and then enforcing the written rules to a higher standard (Hughes).

Middle East

As the 2006 Small Arms Survey notes, Middle Eastern countries rank the highest in gun ownership rates (Small Arms Survey, 2005). Much of these small arms are remnants of the infusion of small arms from the West during the Cold War period. Small arms possession has become a social norm and event sign of status. Today, this surplus contributes to public safety and regional instability. Much of the international focus in the region has been on larger, conventional weapons and nuclear weapons.

Only Israel is amongst the world's top 100 weapon-producing countries. This means that is essential to curb the importation of small arms into Middle Eastern countries. In addition, small-scale disarmament campaigns are underway in Iraq and Afghanistan, but further efforts in reducing inventories of all kinds are imperative to the regions stability.

South Asia

Intrastate conflict has resulted in a healthy weapons trade industry in South Asian countries like Sri Lanka. There, notable groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam are pivotal in the illicit arms trade. The region needs increased border cooperation to eliminate small arms trafficking. (Hari 30)

The Americas

The ill effects of gun violence and illegitimate trade jeopardize Latin America in particular. The symbiotic relationship between gun trafficking and the drug trade in many countries flourishes under weak governmental policy and enforcement. Large amounts of weapons get to Latin America via the US-Mexico border, fueling progressively serious conflict in places such as Mexico, Columbia, and Brazil (Hari p. 30)

6. Non-State Actors

There are several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other firms that are important to be aware of, such as the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), which is a global network of over 700 NGOs and social organizations that are concerned with advocating stronger gun regulation and better arms export controls (IANSA, 2009). Oxfam and Amnesty International are also play major roles as NGOs. They cooperate to headline the Control Arms campaign, which advocates for stronger arms trade restrictions.

7. Items to Consider When Drafting Your Resolution

The resolution should be two-fold, firstly recommending changes to existing measures to improve their effectiveness, as well as introducing new legislation to tackle aspects that remain unsolved. Here are some points to consider:

- What measures can be implemented to address the root causes of armed violence? Namely, how can disarmament, demobilization and reintegration strategies become effective and promote peace, stability and foster development?

- How can we improve on existing measures, such as the Program of Action (PoA), International Tracing Instrument, et cetera?
- How should arms brokering be addressed by legislation?
- How can the illegal manufacturing or weapons and the diversion of legitimate weapons be further combated? Consider licensing, user certification, weapon marking and tracing, et cetera.
- Consider regulation on ammunition supplies and their potential to curb illicit SALW use
- Consider the issue of international transparency, the Transparency Barometer, and its effects on prevention of illicit weapons use. What can be done? How can the globe cooperate on real action?
- Considering that there are an estimated 650 million firearms under civilian control, what measures can be imposed on this portion of the issue?

8. Further Research

- Run searches on major international news sites, including the ones listed below
 - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/>
 - <http://www.nytimes.com/>
 - <http://www.economist.com/>
- Look through United Nations material on the subject, the United Nations Coordinating Action in Small Arms website is a great place to start.
 - <http://www.poa-iss.org/CASA/CASA.aspx>
- The Small Arms Survey website is also rich in information, and easy to navigate.
 - <http://www.poa-iss.org/CASA/CASA.aspx>
- Further research can be conducted through internet searches. It is relatively easy to come across quality, academic material via web searches.

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JPHMUN 2011

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