

SMALL ARMS

Eric G Berman, MANAGING DIRECTOR, SMALL ARMS SURVEY, GENEVA



Arms Control

The land mines treaty of 1997 and the recent agreement to get rid of cluster munitions have outlawed whole categories of weapons. Small arms present an equally dangerous, but much more complex, problem. The United Nations will target it again this month.

tHE ADOPTION OF THE Convention on Cluster Munitions in Dublin on May 30, after fifteen months of focused discussion, shows how states, working together, can make rapid, meaningful progress on arms control and disarmament. Even though some important producers and users, such as the United States, did not participate, it is an impressive achievement. The ten-year multilateral initiatives to deal with the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons have also had their successes, but these have been less spectacular and are only the first steps in a much longer process.

The direct and indirect effects of small arms proliferation and the misuse of small arms are not yet fully understood, but are far-reaching and affect the vast majority of the



world's people. Yet, unlike cluster munitions or anti-personnel landmines, they cannot simply be banned. Small arms and light weapons have a wide range of perfectly legitimate uses, by governments and civilians alike. The challenge is not prohibition, but control and, ultimately, influencing the factors that underpin armed violence.

The United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, agreed exactly seven years ago, provides a valuable framework for world-wide action. A political statement of commitment, rather than a treaty, it sets out a broad range of measures indispensable to global control efforts.

SMALLER TARGET

Questions remain as to how effective the Programme has been in fulfilling its core mandate – to tackle the illicit trade in small arms ‘in all its aspects’. For example, are national export practices more responsible? Has security over national stockpiles been strengthened? Are states now tracing small arms to identify – and disrupt – sources of illicit supply?

The third biennial meeting of states at UN headquarters in New York this month, offers an opportunity to start answering these questions.

National reporting on implementing the Programme will, more than ever, be centre stage. The hope is that by sharing detailed, concrete information on the challenges and opportunities they face, states will use the meeting to advance practical implementation at the national, regional and global levels.

In a departure from previous biennial meetings, which reviewed all the issues covered in the Programme, this one will focus on just three:

- international cooperation, assistance and national capacity-building;
- illicit small arms brokering; and
- stockpile management and surplus destruction or disposal.

Separate sessions will also consider the implementation of the International Tracing Instrument, an offshoot of the Programme, adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2005.

Representatives of Colombia, Egypt, South Korea and Switzerland have been asked to help consideration of each of these themes. They have substantial roles in helping to ensure national interventions are

focused and discussion results-oriented.

Ambassador Dalius Cekuolis from Lithuania, who will be in the chair, has set an agenda and tone that provides a good basis for progress. The challenges states face in combating the illicit small arms trade are vastly more complicated than those, for example, in negotiating a ban on cluster munitions.

MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Similar meetings in 2003 and 2005 to consider progress in implementation were followed, in 2006, by a review conference, which ended without any agreed text. Most observers concluded that states present missed an important opportunity to reinforce existing international measures to tackle the small arms problem; but the differences on display reflected the complexity – and the occasionally controversial nature – of the issue.

Despite the 2006 setback, the programme has yielded useful progress in several areas. It has, for example, created space for civil society organisations to work with governments, as well as to criticise them. While this is nothing new in many other fields, such as the environment or human rights, it is a notable achievement in an area still often stamped – rightly or wrongly – with the imprint of national security. Many national points of contact and coordination agencies, set up under the programme, have established strong working relationships with such organisations, or are influenced by them.

Another significant accomplishment is the practice of national reporting. Some countries' reports on implementation are substantively thin and contain little or no new information from one year to the next. Seven years after the adoption of the Programme, 77 states have failed to report, or produced only one report. Yet many others have provided detailed and comprehensive information.

These reports, which are formally voluntary, but are increasingly considered an essential expression of commitment to the process, promote transparency, the transmission of best practice, and also build confidence and capacity for effective implementation.

We have come a long way in understanding the nature of the problem and designing programmes that address its various aspects. This month's meeting could provide a useful impetus to those efforts, but, whatever the outcome, the small arms challenge will remain with us.

