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UN 'deal' on arms controls means business as usual for the world's worst arms dealers

Joint Statement by the Control Arms campaign: Amnesty International, Oxfam International, IANSA

The new UN agreement on a system to track small arms and light weapons is toothless and riddled with loopholes, according to the Control Arms campaign. The agreement, obtained by the campaign, was negotiated behind closed doors and will be publicly debated for the first time at the UN in New York today.

The Control Arms campaign warned that the failure to agree a legally binding system to track weapons means that unscrupulous arms dealers will continue to get away with selling weapons to serious human rights abusers and war criminals without being traced. They also said it was a worrying precedent that the UN Small Arms Process had taken four years to come up with such a weak output.

Most governments had backed a much stronger, legally binding agreement that covered ammunition as well as weapons, but the opposition of just a few countries, particularly the United States, Iran and Egypt, means that the chance to have a serious impact on the activities of arms dealers has been lost.

The agreement will set up a system to record the serial numbers of small arms and light weapons when they are sold or transferred between countries. However, rather than a legally binding system that would have helped bring those responsible for grave human rights abuses to justice, by enabling weapons to be traced, the agreement is essentially a voluntary one.

Innocent people in poor countries will pay the price of this failure to agree a legally binding system to track lethal weapons, said Anna MacDonald, Director of Campaigns for Oxfam. Countries who already have good records on arms control may comply, but for those countries who routinely sell weapons to the world's worst regimes, it will be business as usual. There is more likelihood of being able to trace a missing suitcase than machine gun bullets.

As well as being, in practice, voluntary, the agreement is weakened by two major loopholes.

Firstly, it completely excludes ammunition, shells and explosives. Often, spent ammunition cartridges and rocket shells are the only clue that investigators have at the scene of an atrocity so it is vital that ammunition shipments are also marked so they can be traced. Excluding it from the agreement will help traffickers and killers evade justice.

Secondly, an explicit loophole in the agreement allows any country to refuse to disclose information about arms sales on the grounds of "national security". It is feared that this will be used as a convenient excuse by those selling arms to oppressive regimes.

It's ludicrous to exclude bullets and explosives from such a global agreement on tracing when these are being used everyday to indiscriminately kill, displace, suppress and intimidate people. This narrow and essentially voluntary agreement is barely worth the paper it is written on, said Denise Searle, Amnesty International's Senior Campaigns Director.

Last year, at the scene of a massacre in Gatumba, Burundi, in which 150 people were killed, spent cartridges showed that the ammunition used in the attack was manufactured in China, Bulgaria and Serbia. However, the lack of any tracing mechanism meant that it was impossible to prove how it got there. Had such a system existed, those who sold the ammunition to the killers could have been held accountable and future supplies could have been stopped.

It is outrageous that a tiny group of countries has obstructed a useful agreement that would have made a real difference, said Rebecca Peters, Director of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA).

Although campaigners found little to welcome in the new agreement, small steps forward include the duty on states to ensure that all illegal small arms and light weapons found on their territory are uniquely marked and recorded, or destroyed; and the obligation to keep comprehensive records on all marked weapons for at least 20 years.

Setting up a binding global system to track small arms, light weapons and ammunition is one of the aims of the Control Arms campaign, which was launched by Oxfam International, Amnesty International and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) in 2003. The campaign's main focus is the call for an international Arms Trade Treaty, to ban all arms transfers that are likely to lead to violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.

Editor's Notes:

The debate on the UN agreement on tracking small arms and light weapons will take place today (Thursday) at 14.00 GMT (10am in New York) at the Biennial Meeting of States at the United Nations in New York. Governments are discussing progress made on the UN Programme of Action on small arms at the meeting.

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