Guns and the Pacific – A Wasteful Hiccup at the United Nations

Recommended Citation

"Guns and the Pacific – A Wasteful Hiccup at the United Nations", APSNet Policy Forum, October 19, 2006, https://nautilus.org/apsnet/0633a-alpers-html/

Guns and the Pacific - A Wasteful Hiccup at the United Nations

Philip Alpers *

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Essay - Guns and the Pacific - A Wasteful Hiccup at the United Nations
3. Nautilus invites your response

Introduction

Philip Alpers from the University of Sydney writes that "five years after the adoption of the UN Programme of Action to address the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons", the recent UN PoA Review Conference closed "without so much as an outcome document." A spin-off Arms Trade Treaty, argues Alpers, "could distract from more direct and localised efforts to curb gun violence."In Pacific Islands Forum countries, "civilians alone hold 3.1 million firearms, or one gun for every ten people", writes Alpers. "After disastrous leakages of government guns in Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, Australia led the charge to help island nations lock up their small arms, building secure state armouries across the region. But of late, regional implementation of the UN PoA has lagged."

Essay - Guns and the Pacific - A Wasteful Hiccup at the United Nations

At the recent United Nations small arms Review Conference in New York, [1] a global process to link the proliferation of small arms with international development, public health and human rights slid into an inconclusive and wasteful hiatus.

In addition, a spin-off Arms Trade Treaty could distract from more direct and localised efforts to curb gun violence. Given current events in East Timor, South East Asia and the Pacific, these are not matters of little consequence to our region, played out in distant Manhattan.

Five years after the adoption of the UN Programme of Action (PoA) to address the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, some 2,000 delegates representing 192 nations, hundreds of international agencies and NGOs, met in July in New York to review progress made and to plot the road ahead. It didn't go far.

"This was a bad outcome… a missed opportunity," said Phil Goff, New Zealand's Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control. At least, as Goff pointed out in a speech, "There were some positives. Nobody tried to undermine the provisions of the PoA as it stands, and there was solid re-commitment to it." [2]

That recommitment will need to be substantial, lest the ebb and flow of world interest in such matters turns hiatus into decline.

Small Arms, Big Problem

Small arms, commonly known as firearms or guns, [3] are used to kill as many as 1,000 people each day. [4] Millions more are wounded, or indirectly affected when development assistance is blocked, when roads to market, health, education and human rights are barred by people with guns.

The authorised trade in small arms is worth US$4 billion a year. [5] Already there are about 640 million firearms in the world, the vast majority of which are in the hands of civilians. [6] Every year, eight million new guns, plus 10 to 14 billion rounds of ammunition are manufactured [7] – enough bullets to kill every person in the world twice over.

The global proliferation of small arms increases both the lethality of violent encounters and the number of victims. Guns increasingly transform minor disputes into shootings and make it easier for children to become killers. In Papua New Guinea, inter-tribal disputes once settled with bows, arrows and machetes are now fought out with assault rifles, many of them supplied by Australia. [8] No community seems immune from this pandemic of gun violence. It overwhelms health services and undermines personal security, economic development, good governance and human rights.

> "The death toll from small arms dwarfs that of all other weapons systems -- and in most years greatly exceeds the toll of the atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In terms of the carnage they cause, small arms, indeed, could well be described as 'weapons of mass destruction'."
>
> - Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations [9]

Small Arms Control at the UN

In recognition of the actual, daily damage done with hand-held guns, the United Nations summarises its global effort to curb the proliferation of small arms as follows: “By unanimously adopting the PoA in 2001, UN member states committed themselves to collecting and destroying illegal weapons, adopting and/or improving national legislation to help criminalize the illicit trade in small arms, regulating the activities of brokers, setting strict import and export controls, taking action against violators of such laws, and better coordinating international efforts to that end.” [10]

But at best the UN PoA is a non-binding, diplomatic promise, a statement of best intentions entirely dependent on consensus. [11] So when, after statements from 117 nations and two weeks of tough negotiations in sessions as long as 18 hours, the conference simply ran out of time, saddened organisers were forced to concede that no agreement was possible, that this hugely expensive event would close without so much as an outcome document.

> “It is to their lasting shame that governments let this happen: they allowed a small number of states to hold them all hostage and to derail any plans which might have brought improvement in this global crisis.”
>
> – Rebecca Peters, Director, International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA)

Multiple Points of Minority Resistance

No single issue, no single nation or bloc caused the failure. Cuba, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan and Venezuela rejected efforts to control international transfers of small arms. Barbados and other Caribbean nations would not have any reference to the impact of illicit firearms on development. Iran and the United States opposed language on the supply of weapons to ‘non-state actors,’ aka freedom fighters – or, given a change of tactics, sometimes terrorists. The United States also objected to the small arms/development link, and to any mention of the regulation of ammunition.

Much of the pressure on the United States to slow the momentum of the UN small arms process is clearly domestic. On the official US delegation were two members of the board of the National Rifle Association of America (NRA), with no balancing NGOs permitted. The NRA, ranked by Fortune magazine as America’s most powerful political lobby, organised its members to send 100,000 form letters opposing the Review Conference, which by coincidence straddled Independence Day. Although the UN in New York is always closed for the 4th of July holiday, the protest cards, addressed to Kofi Annan, read in part:

> “The 4th of July is America's most revered national holiday. Yet, you've invited 50 dictatorships and six terrorist states to join with you on that day in your conspiracy to ban civilian firearms ownership worldwide and strip Americans of our freedoms.” [12]

Added to the Bush Administration’s ongoing campaign to rein in the United Nations across the board, and US antipathy to gun violence prevention in particular, the gun lobby’s pressure on domestic politics ensured a strong undercurrent of American opposition at every meeting of delegates.

The Pacific Position

In broad terms Australia, New Zealand and other members of the Pacific Islands Forum lined up with the progressive states – the European Union (EU), Canada, sub-Saharan Africa and much of Latin America. In contrast with a variety of nations and regions, none of the 16 Forum states took a blocking position on any contentious topic.

Pacific nations supported the majority at the UN, but not as uninvolved observers of someone else's problem. According to local NGOs and governments alike, illicit guns have become a serious impediment to recovery and redevelopment in our own region. Across all nations of the Pacific Islands Forum, civilians alone hold 3.1 million firearms, or one gun for every ten people. This surpasses the global ratio of privately held firearms to population by more than 50 per cent. [13] Particularly in Melanesia and East Timor, there is now broad consensus among governments, donor agencies, and civil society that disarmament and the security or destruction of small arms are essential prerequisites for human security, good health, and prosperity. [14]

Politically, New Zealand and Australia extended solid early support to the UN process. In the first years of PoA implementation, both countries funded baseline research on the proliferation and impact of small arms in the Pacific. After disastrous "leakages" of government guns in Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, Australia led the charge to help island nations lock up their small arms, building secure state armouries across the region. But of late, regional implementation of the UN PoA has lagged. An effort to close legislative loopholes by harmonising national firearm laws across Pacific Islands Forum nations has slowed to a standstill, and oft-made government pledges to enlist the support of civil society in ongoing grassroots implementation and disarmament have come to little. Given our advance knowledge of likely hot spots (the 2007 national elections in PNG come to mind), it would be disheartening for this region to be reminded of the value of prevention only by another outbreak of armed violence.

Growth of Civil Society Involvement

The UN conference did highlight a burgeoning civil society commitment to counter the global epidemic of gun-related death, injury and disruption. IANSA, the 600-NGO International Action Network on Small Arms, fielded over 200 delegates, 30 of whom sat as official representatives on their government teams. The Australian and New Zealand official delegations included three NGOs each. Strong submissions in support of strengthening the PoA were made by several international and regional organisations, including the World Health Organisation, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations Development Programme.

In a notable trend since the UN small arms process began in 1997, the range of interested parties has grown exponentially. Around the original, but small core of military-focused diplomats and 'arms control' NGOs has gathered a much larger, inter-disciplinary circle of development agencies, public health professionals, criminologists, economists, human rights advocates, violence prevention, victim support and women's groups, all trying to reduce the daily toll of injury by gunshot. From a narrow interest group once constrained by a focus on the security of the state, the small arms campaign has broadened, shifting attention to the security of individuals – human security and human rights.

At the forefront of priority issues for a variety of delegates were the difficulties and risks posed by armed violence to aid recipients and development workers alike, and the crucial role of guns in human rights abuses. International humanitarian law (IHL) emerged as a crux issue for many NGOs, yet after closed-door discussions between states, all references to IHL were progressively weakened, then stripped from conference papers. Likewise, the links between small arms proliferation and development were minimised with each new draft. From the Pacific, only New Zealand made reference to IHL, stressing the humanitarian consequences of widespread availability of small arms.

Although the United States with its candour took much of the flak – flatly refusing, for example, to discuss civilian possession of firearms, or to agree even to another UN Review Conference in 2012 – there seemed little doubt that China, Russia, Israel and perhaps other arms-manufacturing nations would have stepped up to the plate to block consensus, had the US been quiet. Unusually, instead of being allowed to make decisions on the floor according to a predetermined mandate, the US delegation created lengthy delays on the crucial final day of the conference as it waited for point-b--point instructions from Washington.

The Arms Trade Treaty

Springing out of the ongoing UN small arms PoA process, a possible Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) is a separate and much broader issue. Based on states' existing responsibilities under international law, such a treaty would cover exports not only of small arms, but all conventional arms including warships, tanks, and attack aircraft. Already the Control Arms campaign, a global alliance of Oxfam, the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) and Amnesty International, now joined by 20 Nobel Peace laureates, has gathered more than a million faces and names for a visual petition to Kofi Annan in support of an ATT. [15]

This month at the UN General Assembly in New York, the UK is promoting a First Committee resolution, [16] co-sponsored by Australia, New Zealand, East Timor and 97 others to date, which calls for a Group of Governmental Experts to work on a mandate for drafting an ATT. Eventually, such a treaty could include legally binding global standards for transfers of all conventional arms, small and large.

But even in opening discussions, promoters of the treaty began to lower expectations. Despite energetically promoting it, the Control Arms campaign notes that the resolution in its current form fails to make crucial references to international human rights law, which NGOs see as a fundamental requirement of an ATT. At the very least, human rights campaigners wanted a requirement added to prohibit small arms transfers if the weapons are likely to be used to commit serious human rights violations.

While the initiative and energy now focused on an associated, but separate campaign for a legally binding treaty are valued and supported by many small arms campaigners, others voice concern. By choosing to turn back into military-focused negotiations at which human security traditionally takes a back seat to state security, ATT campaigners return to the old 'arms control' track – a route of little progress in recent years. Instead of bringing to bear the newly broadened gun violence prevention constituency on the comparatively small and discredited small arms trade, ATT campaigners have chosen to poke a stick at the 1.1 trillion-dollar arms industry, the global military-industrial complex and the governments of the world's largest arms-trading nations. The top five arms producers are also the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Such tactics seem unlikely to buy much more than a drawn-out war over big weapons and big profits, with perhaps few results. Even in its current wording and without the inevitable well-organised opposition, it is hard to imagine the proposed Arms Trade Treaty lowering the daily toll of gun death any time in the foreseeable future.

The Original UN Campaign Rolls On

Meanwhile back inside the UN small arms PoA process, a growing majority of states – at least 115 at the New York conference – also spoke out in support of a set of Global Principles for Arms Transfers. Supported once again by the Control Arms campaign, these target just small arms and light weapons, could form a politically binding agreement within the PoA, and might also be promoted for later inclusion in a legally binding ATT of much broader scope. At the New York conference, the UK

negotiated informal consensus which could lead to future progress on the Global Principles within the PoA. In this way and many others, the original UN/NGO campaign to reduce death, injury and disruption by gunshot continues.

Although no final document was possible at the UN Review Conference in New York – and failure to agree was perhaps a better result than the weakened draft being circulated before the conference meltdown – all member states in their closing statements did promise to fully implement the existing UN small arms PoA. The majority of nations are likely to support continued biennial meetings with a Review Conference in 2012, and Canada also announced an informal meeting in Geneva in June, 2007 to focus on arms transfer controls. The United States was the only country which opposed any follow-up on the UN PoA at the global level.

What Next for Our Region?

Back home in the Pacific, New Zealand's Phil Goff recalled the tangible, real-time benefits of local disarmament efforts: "Dangerous security situations within our own region such as Timor Leste, Solomon Islands and Bougainville could have been much more tragic but for the progress achieved in removing and destroying firearms from their communities."

Sadly, less progress has been achieved in heavily armed parts of Papua New Guinea. In the tinderbox Southern Highlands Province, large numbers of high-powered military and law enforcement weapons, thousands of which were provided by the Australian government during PNG's move to independence, have been leaked to criminals, tribal fighters, political candidates, sitting MPs and their gangs. [17] By most accounts, these and other conflict entrepreneurs are tooling up once again to influence next year's national polls by means of armed violence and gun-barrel electioneering.

Increasingly in parts of the Pacific, guns have been adopted with alacrity for their perceived powers of intimidation, interpersonal problem-solving and resource allocation. Concerted attention by all stakeholders remains essential to minimise the public health, human rights and economic impacts of this shift. And as often happens when prevention is neglected in favour of waiting at the bottom of the cliff, minimising the impact of loose guns in our region is perhaps now all we can hope for.

Information about the author

Philip Alpers, adjunct associate professor at the School of Public Health at the University of Sydney, studies the public health effects of gun violence and the proliferation of firearms, particularly in the Pacific (www.gunpolicy.org/about.php). He attended the UN small arms Review Conference as a member of the New Zealand government delegation, for Oxfam Australia and IANSA Pacific.

Contact: http://www.gunpolicy.org/contactus.php external-link

End notes

This article was first written for the IHL Newsletter of the New South Wales Red Cross.

[1] The United Nations Conference to Review Progress Made in the Implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, New York, 26 June – 7 July 2006, at: http://www.un.org/events/smallarms2006

[2] Speech by Hon Phil Goff: http://www.beehive.govt.nz/ViewDocument.aspx?DocumentID=26666

[3] The United Nations defines small arms as 'revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, assault rifles, sub-machine guns, and light machine guns.' See: http://disarmament2.un.org/cab/smallarms/docs/rep52298.pdf

[4] From www.iansa.org, based on estimates from the Small Arms Survey yearbooks 2001-2004. Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva. Oxford University Press. Available from: www.smallarmssurvey.org

[5] Small Arms Survey 2004: Rights at Risk. Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva. Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 100.

[6] Small Arms Survey 2003: Development Denied. Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva. Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 58.

[7] Ibid., p. 13.

[8] Alpers, Philip. Gun-running in Papua New Guinea: From Arrows to Assault Weapons in the Southern Highlands. Special Report No. 5. Geneva: Small Arms Survey, June 2005. At: http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/files/sas/publications/spe_reports.html

[9] Annan, Kofi.*Freedom From Fear: Report of the Secretary-General to the Millennium Assembly of the United Nations*. United Nations. New York, 27 March 2000, at: http://www.un.org/millennium/sg/report/ch3.pdf

[10] UN conference Background Release DC/3027: http://www.un.org//News/Press/docs/2006/dc3027.doc.htm

[11] For more on the UN small arms process and its various international instruments, a useful list of Frequently Asked Questions can be found at: http://www.un.org/events/smallarms2006/faq.html

[12] LaPierre, Wayne. “Fire ‘A Shot Heard Around the World’.” America's 1st Freedom. National Rifle Association of America. Fairfax, Virginia. 1 June 2006.

[13] Alpers, Philip & Conor Twyford. Small Arms in the Pacific. Occasional Paper No. 8. Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Mar 2003. At: http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/files/sas/publications/o_papers.html

[14] For Australia’s small arms policy, start at: http://www.dfat.gov.au/security/small_arms.html

[15] Control Arms: www.controlarms.org IANSA: www.iansa.org

[16] ATT resolution to UNGA First Committee: http://www.iansa.org/un/FirstCommittee2006.htm

[17] Alpers (2005).

Nautilus invites your response

The Austral Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to the editor, Jane Mullett: austral@rmit.edu.au. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by the Nautilus Institute at RMIT, Austral Peace and Security Network (APSNet). You can review the 2006 archives. You might like to subscribe to the free Twice weekly newsletter.

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/apsnet/0633a-alpers-html/

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org