



briefing

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Small Arms and the Global Summit

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The latest draft outcome document of the forthcoming global summit (UN 2005) is particularly weak in its attention to small arms and light weapons (SALW). While including a welcome statement of concern, in the context of transnational crime, about the impact of small arms on development, peace and security, and human rights (para 91), the document is silent on the kinds of basic principles that should be articulated and affirmed in a summit declaration.

Five years ago the Millennium summit urged states

To take concerted action to end illicit traffic in small arms and light weapons, especially by making arms transfers more transparent and supporting regional disarmament measures, taking account of all the recommendations of the forthcoming United Nations Conference on Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons.

Since that general appeal at least three primary principles have emerged as central to addressing the small arms challenge – three principles that should be reflected in the summit declaration:

- Small arms possession and use by individuals must be restrictive and effectively regulated by states according to international standards;
- The trade in small arms – private and government-to-government transfers – must also be regulated according to international standards; and

- The use of small arms by security forces must comply with basic human rights and humanitarian standards.

The draft implicitly endorses the principle on regulating transfers, but is silent on the others. It helpfully supports two important small arms control policy measures, calling on states to adopt and implement international instruments on marking and tracing of small arms and to regulate small arms transfers (including regulation of the activities of brokers).

The draft also commits states to implementing the 2001 UN small arms program of action (POA), but much is left out. There is no sense of urgency about the need to deal with the global humanitarian catastrophe caused by small arms – which includes some 300,000 deaths annually and devastating impediments to development. There is no commitment to seriously address the small arms problem, either through attention to political, social, and economic conditions that generate demand for SALW, or, for example, through accelerated programs to demobilize and disarm combatants and reintegrate them into local communities.

But even the minimalist agenda that did make it into the draft is now threatened by the United States. The United States, through Ambassador John Bolton, has proposed that the one paragraph addressed specifically to the small arms issue be eliminated, thus cutting support for the POA as well as cutting the marking, tracing, and transfer control

commitments from the document (para 61). In addition the US proposes to cut para 63 on landmines.

The US does propose adding a paragraph that calls on states to “explore effective measures to prevent and combat the proliferation of advanced conventional weapons and MANPADS [man-portable air defence systems], as well as to ban their transfer to non-State actors, including by implementing effective national export controls.” The term “advanced conventional weapons” is not defined, but the reference to preventing the proliferation of MANPADS is welcome as these systems represent a growing threat to civil aviation. Of course, the paragraph’s emphasis on national measures, rather than universal standards to be implemented by states, conforms to the US focus on national prerogatives and resisting any effective collective or UN role in security measures.

Negotiations continue and states, including Canada,¹ should be encouraged to insist on a small arms agenda that includes the leaders’ endorsement of the

three basic principles of small arms control noted above.

Note

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Reference

UN 2005, “Revised draft outcome document of the High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly of September 2005 submitted by the President of the General Assembly,” 5 August (A/59/HLPM/CRP.1/Rev.2). [Online]. Available from: http://www.un.org/ga/59/hl60_plenarymeeting.html.

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Project Ploughshares is an ecumenical agency of the Canadian Council of Churches that works with churches and related organizations, as well as governments and non-governmental organizations, in Canada and abroad, to identify, develop, and advance approaches that build peace and prevent war, and promote the peaceful resolution of political conflict.

“and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4)