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The UN conference on small arms: Hopes and fears An interview with Rebecca Peters

From 26 June until 7 July, states will gather at the United Nations in New York to review progress that has been made since 2001 in implementing the Programme of Action (PoA) to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects.

Along with delegates from UN Member States, representatives from a large number of NGOs from around the world will attend. Two staff members from Project Ploughshares will be there: Ken Epps as an NGO representative on the official Government of Canada delegation, and Lynne Griffiths-Fulton representing Ploughshares and the Small Arms Working Group of the Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee. Most of the NGOs attending, including Project Ploughshares, are members of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), a global network working to prevent the deadly effects of small arms. Founded in 1998, in Orillia, Ontario, IANSA now has more than 700 participant groups in nearly 100 countries.

IANSA has followed and contributed to the UN Small Arms process since the beginning, supporting, in particular, policy development and advocacy at the international level.

In this interview, Rebecca Peters, IANSA's Director, shares her thoughts on the UN Programme of Action process, what is working and what is not, and how civil society organizations can help to bring about a positive outcome to the discussions at the Review Conference.

Ploughshares: Briefly describe the scope of the international small arms problem.

Peters: The small arms problem comes in many forms: gun violence in conflict zones, accidents, suicides, street crime, disputes where previously law-abiding but armed citizens lose their tempers, gun assaults, and homicides. Millions of people each year are intimidated, terrorized, kidnapped, or driven from their homes at gunpoint. The easy availability of guns has fuelled the phenomenon of child soldiers and reversed the balance of authority in traditional communities. Armed violence is the main factor that creates flows of refugees and internally displaced persons. More human rights violations

are perpetrated with guns than with any other kind of weapon. As well, gun violence disrupts employment and commercial activity, discourages and destroys investments, and drains resources from health and criminal justice budgets.

Ploughshares: The 2001 UN Programme of Action on Small Arms commits each Member State to work towards the reduction of gun violence internally and to control the illicit international trade of small arms. What progress have Member States made since 2001 in meeting the goals set out in the PoA?

Peters: To date, states have made the most progress in implementing the more specific and concrete provisions in the PoA—most have designated an official Point of Contact on small arms, established National Commissions on small arms, and submitted national reports on their implementation of the PoA. Around one-third of states have conducted some form of domestic disarmament. Such progress is useful, but only a start; the bulk of the implementation work still lies ahead.

Interestingly, we have also seen progress on an aspect of the small arms problem not actually mentioned in the PoA, namely the regulation of gun sales to civilians. The widespread interest in civilian firearm regulation among Member States is reflected in the record of national legislative initiatives over the past five years. Stronger gun control laws have been proposed or passed in many countries, including Afghanistan, Belgium, Cambodia, El Salvador, Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Lebanon, Liberia, Montenegro, Nicaragua, Panama, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Thailand, and Yemen.

Brazil, which suffers from the highest number of gun deaths in the world, has made some of the most significant progress since 2001. Brazil's Disarmament Statute of 2003 toughened the licence requirements and introduced a register of legally owned firearms, among other measures. It was followed by one of the largest disarmament campaigns in history. Brazil recovered and destroyed 450,000 guns! As a result of these measures, gun deaths dropped 8 percent within a year of the Statute's becoming law—the first drop in gun deaths in Brazil for 12 years.

As well, there have been developments in linking small arms proliferation to poverty and development.

Ploughshares: What has disappointed you most about the progress made since 2001?

Peters: One definite disappointment has been the lack of success in producing a global legal instrument on marking, recordkeeping, and tracing. There is no universal system of serial numbers for guns. Some countries require serial numbers and some do not, and even within countries the numbers are frequently duplicated or reused. The idea behind the new instrument was to require unique identifying information to be marked on every gun, which would allow investigators to trace illicit small arms to their source and take preventive measures against further diversion. To achieve this purpose, the instrument

needed to be comprehensive and legally binding. Unfortunately, the instrument agreed to in 2005 is not legally binding but only voluntary, and does not cover ammunition.

Also disappointing have been the continuing and unnecessary delays in deciding how to regulate arms brokers. In 2001 a UN Group of Government Experts reported on the problem of brokers evading regulation, and since then most states have come to understand the need for licensing and other measures to control brokers. The UN small arms process should have taken the next step and established a working group to develop an international legal instrument on brokering, or at least to consider the feasibility of such an instrument. Instead we have a decision simply to establish another Group of Governmental Experts in late 2006 or 2007, to “consider further steps to enhance international cooperation.”

Other gaps in the PoA need to be addressed. There is some political will but also strong opposition to legally binding instruments to control small arms. The PoA contains no reference to human rights or the misuse of guns by state officials. It doesn't attempt to regulate the civilian use of small arms—although, as I've mentioned, states are going ahead and strengthening national legislation in spite of this—nor does it acknowledge the disproportional effect of gun violence on women. The PoA does not recognize that the legal market is the original source of the illegal trade and it neglects the problem of arms transfers to non-state actors. IANSA members are pressing governments to rectify these omissions either at the Review Conference itself or in the follow-up process.

Ploughshares: Where are you looking for progress at the Review Conference?

Peters: IANSA is following the progress that the Chair-Designate of the Review Conference, Ambassador Kariyawasam of Sri Lanka, is making in terms of meeting with states and drawing up a paper that will be debated by states in June. Although we have reason to hope that the Chair's paper will be strong and cover the issues that IANSA members are concerned about, some states do not want to see a broadening or strengthening of PoA commitments.

We believe that we may be able to get governments to agree to move forward on five key issues. We are encouraging our members to meet with their own national officials to lobby for these issues in the run-up to the Review Conference:

1. Controls on international transfers of small arms
2. National firearms legislation
3. Integrating development and small arms control
4. Responding to the needs of survivors of small arms violence
5. Follow-on mechanisms for the UN process on small arms.

It will take political determination, courage, and strategic action to dam the flood of guns effectively.

Ploughshares: Members of IANSA, including Project Ploughshares, will be attending the Review Conference in June-July. What role do you anticipate for NGOs at the Review Conference? What role is IANSA advocating for civil society?

Peters: Before the 2005 Biennial Meeting, the Chair, Ambassador Pasi Patokallio of Finland, wrote that “NGOs are our full partners in the field and they should be our full partners in the conference room.” At the Review Conference’s Preparatory Committee in January, the chair, Ambassador Rowe, was equally committed to civil society participation. Such a commitment is in line with the PoA, which explicitly recognizes the important role of civil society in implementing its provisions and recommendations.

At the Review Conference we are expecting that there will be a discrete three-hour block for NGO presentations, including the pro-gun groups. It would obviously be far more useful both for speakers and listeners if NGOs could make occasional relevant interventions on specific themes during the meeting, rather than delivering three hours of continuous speeches on one afternoon.

At the PrepCom 15 governments showed their support for civil society by inviting IANSA members to form part of their national delegations. The Netherlands, Mexico, and Norway even invited their IANSA delegates to speak on behalf of the national delegation during thematic discussions. Canada has been a strong supporter of NGO participation and has included civil society representatives on official delegations at all small arms meetings since 2001. The Canadian government should be encouraged to adopt this position again and to speak out if NGO access is blocked by other states.

If we are not fully included in the debates at the Review Conference we will meet informally with states on the sidelines, and prepare advocacy and policy briefs for IANSA members to use in their own informal discussions with delegates. NGOs and states, sometimes working cooperatively, also organize events on the margins of the formal meetings. Here NGOs can raise more specific issues and put forward recommendations for states to take into account during their formal deliberations.

Civil society participation in the UN small arms process is vital. Some UN missions have high staff rotation, or simply lack enough diplomats to permit specialization on the topic of small arms. NGOs, because of their specific field and research experience, have significant expertise that they can offer to governments and diplomats involved in the UN small arms process.

Ploughshares: What can the general public do to support these efforts in advance of the Review Conference?

Peters: IANSA is part of the global Control Arms campaign, which I know Project Ploughshares and others in Canada are promoting. In March we started counting down the 100 days before the Review Conference. We need people to [take](#) action now!

People can sign the Million Faces petition at www.controlarms.org and support the work of their own national organizations, like Project Ploughshares. Over 900,000 people from around the world have already added their picture to the Million Faces Petition, so we are close to reaching our target of a million by the end of June. During the week of May 22–29, IANSA is holding its sixth Global Week of action. This will be a key time for our members to hold events—marches, concerts, stunts, press conferences—to put pressure on their governments to support tougher international controls on arms. In many countries, IANSA members will be presenting their Million Faces photo petitions to their governments. Watch out for events in Canada and watch our website (www.iansa.org) for more information.

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