Statement to First Committee
on the Arms Trade Treaty and
on Small Arms and Light Weapons
delivered by Anna Macdonald on behalf of
Control Arms Coalition
&
International Action Network on Small Arms

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Mr Chair,

10 years ago civil society from around the world came together to launch the Control Arms campaign in 70 countries. Our message was simple: the arms trade is out of control and ordinary people around the world are suffering at the rate of one death every minute, with millions more forced from their homes, suffering abuse and impoverishment. Armed violence destroys lives and it destroys hope.

We had an idea. We had a vision. A global treaty to bring the conventional arms trade under control. To make governments take responsibility for every arms transfer that enters or leaves their territory. And to put human rights and humanitarian law, not profit, or politics at the heart of every decision.

It has taken more than a decade of determined campaigning to get us to where we are today. But here we are – 10 years on and with an Arms Trade Treaty adopted at the UN by overwhelming majority vote, and a world that has come together and said enough is enough, it is time for change.

The ATT is a success for us all. For the UN, for governments and for civil society. We can all be justly proud that we have managed to get the words on the paper. But now we need the action on the ground.

Let us all remember that the purpose of this treaty is to save and protect lives. It is this humanitarian goal that has driven the ATT, and this must remain our collective aim as we move into the next important stage of ensuring effective treaty implementation. If this is done well, the ATT will reduce human suffering, promote development and help tackle the inescapable link between poverty and armed violence. It can help reduce the suffering that women and children in particular experience during armed conflict.

Nowhere is the need for an effective treaty so apparent as in the devastating humanitarian crisis in Syria. More than two years of war has killed over 100,000 people and over seven million are in dire need of humanitarian aid. The number of deaths and refugees has climbed as the fighting has intensified and spread. The conflict has been fuelled by transfers of arms, munitions and ammunition from outside parties. The world is focused on the vital work of reinforcing the norm
against the use of chemical weapons. However it is just as vital to reinforce the principles of international humanitarian law and human rights law that are at the heart of the ATT, and stop transferring arms to any warring party in Syria, or indeed to any conflict zone where there is a high risk of misuse.

It is extremely positive that well over half of UN member states have now signed the treaty, including the world’s biggest arms exporter, and that eight states have already ratified. Entry into Force can be achieved next year.

But ratification is only the beginning. Governments must take their role of implementing the ATT very seriously. This is a treaty about saving lives and transforming the way the arms trade operates. It will require changes in legislation, and even more importantly, changes in behavior.

States must rigorously assess all arms and ammunition transfers, whether they are leaving, entering, or passing through their territory. They must apply the treaty’s criteria robustly, and deny arms transfers where there is a substantial risk that they will lead to violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including gender based violence. The risks of diversion to illicit users must also be thoroughly assessed, as must the risks of corrupt practices.

Some states will need assistance to be able to implement the treaty, and to set up the necessary export control systems. Better-resourced governments must support those with less means, financially and with technical assistance.

The Control Arms Coalition remains committed to working with governments and UN agencies to support treaty implementation. Together we worked to make this treaty become a reality. It was no easy task; it required great tenacity and perseverance. The next phase will be equally challenging, but we must rise to it together. It is too important not to.

Mr Chair,

I now turn my attention to the issue of small arms and light weapons.

The problem of the particular proliferation and misuse of Small Arms and Light Weapons has been highlighted by many governments during this month. Many governments of countries affected by armed violence and conflict were instrumental in ensuring that SALW were included in the ATT, and if properly implemented, the treaty can help to reduce the amount of weapons that move from the licit to illicit trade.

Last month the United Nations Security Council passed the landmark Resolution 2117 on small arms and light weapons. The International Action Network on Small Arms, which includes many national civil society organisations from all over the globe, welcomes this resolution which expresses grave concern that the illicit transfer, destabilizing accumulation and misuse of small arms pose threats to international peace and security and cause significant loss of life.

It is estimated that there at least 875 million small arms in existence in the world. Millions of new guns are being produced each year. The effects of this vast quantity of weapons, most of which are not in the hands of police or military forces, are felt in all regions. For example, in North Africa huge warehouses full of small arms and light weapons acquired by Libya over decades (and far in excess of what was needed by its armed forces) spread to neighbouring countries after the end of the 2011
Almost 25 years ago in Mali stocks of small arms and light weapons left after a civil war were ceremonially burnt in the Flame of Peace, an event which inspired international efforts which culminated in the UN Programme of Action. It is a grim, sad irony that ten years after the PoA was agreed, Mali’s security and people were once again threatened by small arms and light weapons flooding into the country in the aftermath of Libya’s civil war.

But it is not only countries suffering from conflict that are feeling the costs of small arms proliferation and misuse. The majority of violent deaths take place outside of conflict situations. Armed violence affects all societies, all countries and people of all walks of life.

Progress on the UN PoA implementation is uneven and incomplete and should remain a key priority. A number of governments and regional organisations, especially in Africa, have been making significant strides in SALW marking and recordkeeping, and this is to be commended. However, much more remains to be done. IANSA remains deeply concerned by the slow pace by which the majority of Member States have amended and reformed small arms and light weapons legislation but not changed actual practices enough.

In many regions, particularly those areas affected by high levels of armed violence, there is a profound need for enhanced international cooperation and assistance to support the vital activities of governments and civil society. But we should not limit our ambitions to the trade in weapons. An equally important contribution to improving peace and security comes from preventing abuses committed using weapons that are already in people’s hands. Members of armed forces and police in all countries must respect relevant international law and standards concerning the use of weapons, especially International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law and the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.

In the area of safe-and-secure stockpile management, substantial interventions are still required. Good stockpile management, the destruction of surpluses and diversion-prevention is equally essential in countries be they in or outside of conflict. Research undertaken by UN investigators into arms embargo violations reveals that insurgent groups have been able to source arms and ammunition from inadequately secured weapons stockpiles held by governments and peacekeepers in conflict hotspots.

Last year the UN Secretary General stated that ‘the world is over-armed and peace is under-funded’. Control Arms and IANSA echo that sentiment. The nations of the world need to focus on peace-building, effective arms control and regulation, not on further accumulation.

Thank you.