Small arms and light weapons
International Action Network on Small Arms

Background

Small arms and light weapons (SALW) continue to be the weapons of choice in many acts of armed violence. According to the Small Arms Survey, on average, 535,000 people die each year as the result of armed violence. Of these deaths, an estimated 17 percent are the direct result of conflict. In order to develop a comprehensive approach to reducing deaths caused by SALW, states need to focus on armed violence as a whole, rather than limiting their efforts to addressing only conflict violence.

Key instruments that address the trade in and misuse of SALW include the UN Programme of Action to Reduce, Combat, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects (UNPoA, 2001) and its accompanying International Tracing Instrument (2005), as well as the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which entered into force in December 2014.

Current context

In June 2018, the United Nations will hold a two-week conference in New York to review the implementation of the UNPoA (RevCon 3). The Preparatory Committee meeting for RevCon 3 will take place in New York in March 2018. These meetings provide an opportunity to review and strengthen the UNPoA and provide a framework for work for the First Committee and beyond.

The French government will hold the presidency of RevCon 3, and has stated four top priorities for the conference:

1. Recognising the urgency of the threat
2. Strengthening and sustaining our commitment
3. Ensuring a comprehensive approach
4. Prioritizing concrete achievements

States also have the opportunity to continue building on the sixth Biennial Meeting of States (BMS6) on the UNPoA, which provided important consideration of gender issues, the relationship between the UNPoA and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the full weapons cycle, including destruction. BMS6 also considered key areas of potential synergy among the UNPoA, other activities at the UN, and other instruments dealing with arms transfers.

Continuing implementation challenges with the UNPoA include uneven commitment to the instrument, resource constraints, and lack of infrastructure for implementation. Consensus decision-making also remains a weak link of the process.
Recommendations

During First Committee, delegations should establish a far-reaching agenda for the 2018 UNPoA Review Conference, including:

- Preparing proposals to make explicit the inclusion of the illicit trade in ammunition in the UNPoA;
- Developing measures to address pervasive SALW violence in crime as well as conflict settings, recognising that the vast majority of armed violence deaths are not the direct result of conflict;
- Continuing their focus on gender-based action to curb SALW proliferation and violence, and working to decrease the gaps in women’s participation and representation in the SALW process;
- Focusing on links among SALW reduction, SDG 16.4, and development; and
- Considering synergies between the PoA and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), to enhance implementation of both instruments.4

Beyond First Committee, states should:

- Utilise UNPoA provisions on recordkeeping, end-user certification, prevention of diversion, and provision for destruction of surplus weapons and weapons that remain when conflicts end, to strengthen the implementation of other instruments;
- Apply the criteria, guidelines, and prohibitions in the ATT to help bring more of the international trade in weapons into compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law;
- Include NGOs as full partners in the work to reduce the human costs of armed violence, include NGO representatives on national delegations, and commit to keeping negotiation sessions open at multilateral meetings so that NGOs are able to contribute more fully; and
- Focus on implementing SDGs in addition to SDG 16.4 that are related to arms control issues; e.g. pursuing SDG 5, “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls,” through the UNPoA and ATT. This would affect the substance of states’ deliberations, as well as the membership and staffing of relevant agencies, national commissions, and delegations to international meetings and negotiations.

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3 See “Gaps in Women’s Participation and Representation in the Small Arms and Light Weapons Process,” IANSA, June 2017, for additional detail and recommendations on these issues: https://tinyurl.com/y9pcfaq.
4 See “Five key issues for the 2018 Review Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons,” IANSA, June 2017, for additional detail and recommendations on these issues: https://tinyurl.com/ybxc8ud5.