

Small arms violence & future of Africa

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5.7.03 By Dr Salim Ahmed Salim and Dr Ishmael Noko *Africa*

SMALL arms violence threatens the future of Africa. An ever-expanding illicit traffic in small arms and light weapons (SALW) is thriving on the back of the continent's youth, with a whole generation of children being inducted into a culture of violence marked by death and injury. Annually, SALW kill more than half a million innocent civilians. As Secretary-General Kofi Annan states: "SALW must be brought back under the control of states, with states being made accountable for their transfer."

This month, UN member States will meet in New York to assess progress made in implementing the Programme of Action (PoA) adopted by the 2001 UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects. The NGOs and governments are concerned that the conference follow-up remains long on recommendations, but short on implementation. Not all states have stepped up efforts to meet their obligations, let alone confront the challenge. Some manufacturers have not lived up to promises made to the conference on account of having to placate an openly hostile domestic constituency. SALW proliferation has increased, not decreased.

The PoA adopted important recommendations made by African ministers in the Bamako Declaration of OAU, adopted in December 2000. Regrettably, however, the PoA fell short of African expectations on commitment of states to future treaty-making mandates, especially on tracing through marking and information exchange. Moreover, the UN conference failed Africa on two critical issues: civilian non-possession and non-transfer to non-state actors.

The conference almost collapsed, because some producing countries were opposed to increased transparency in exports. In order to salvage the conference from collapse, African states gave up on demands to halt small arms transfers to non-state actors. African States had been pushing for this demand, because the continent's chronic wars are in part fought for control of scarce resources and are financed by a dangerous alliance of criminal, commercial and corrupt political interests with profits gained from diamond and oil exports.

The moratorium of West African states not to produce, import or export SALW, an important initiative of Alpha Oumar Konare, then the President of Mali — the first of its kind in the world — shows the determination of the people and governments of the region. Cooperation on eradicating SALW proliferation to regions in conflict must be as much at the top of the international anti-terror campaign as efforts to deprive terrorists of financial and logistical resources. At issue is not the legitimacy of government transfers to allies in times of war. But, especially in these cases the large weapons exporting states are called to utmost accountability in order to ensure the whereabouts of these weapons in order to enable post-conflict and destruction.

A new emphasis must be placed on the traceability of small arms to their illicit sources through mandatory marking and information exchange. Standards for small arms transfers under international law as well as state accountability in small arms transfer must be enhanced. Governmental transaction must be held to the same standards as commercial transactions.

The Eminent Persons Group

(EPG), an international commission of 23 personalities, advisory to the secretary-general, cooperates with leading small arms manufacturers in the Paris process in order to advance Mr Annan's vision of a global small arms nonproliferation regime as set forth in the Millennium Report.

The EPG supports the secretary-general's call for enhanced transparency in small arms exports, as appropriate, as it is affirmed in the SG's Report on Small Arms. The secretary-general states: "Transparency in armaments and other confidence-building measures in the military and security domains can help states, particularly those in and near conflict areas, to promote security and stability and reduce regional tensions."

Under the Paris Chairmen's Report, which was circulated as a document of the 2001 UN conference, manufacturing interests committed themselves to instituting standards for the marking and tracing of small arms, and provide further assistance in efforts against SALW transfers which may violate human rights, UN embargoes, or which may be used in genocide, illegal acts of aggression etc.

Manufacturers must now implement and expand upon promises made to the 2001 UN conference. With more than 90% of illicitly trafficked small arms originating in the licit trade, manufacturers bear a special responsibility. In building on national legislation, voluntary measures are complementary to international action on issues, where consensus on binding agreements may prove attainable in future.

At this critical stage of contention in international relations it is important to note that key recipient and exporting states, including China, Russia, the UK and the US support efforts to

enhance understanding and cooperation towards a common goal.

The Government of Ghana must be lauded for helping build further upon cooperation and understanding between importing and exporting interests. The tireless efforts of General Emmanuel Erskine, the Chairman of the National Reconciliation Commission and incoming Co-Chair of the EPG Advisory Group, are especially noteworthy. Following the three day national consultation in Accra, 23-25 June 2003, organized under the auspices of the Foundation for Security & Development in Africa, which is chaired by General Erskine, the Government of Ghana declared its intent to engage in a serious dialogue with manufacturers, with a view to formalizing and controlling their activities. The EPG fully supports these efforts.

Enhanced transparency in exports is an important confidence-building measure in joint efforts to help eradicate their illicit proliferation. Ongoing consultations with key manufacturing/exporting states and manufacturers are encouraging and provide hope for agreement on an export transparency measure which, in cooperation between supplier/recipient states and the African Union, will provide data on small arms exported to Africa. That, in furtherance of the G-8 Summit statement in Calgary and the OSCE Document on Small Arms would prove a true testament to the universal support for African concerns and the Bamako Declaration of OAU. ■

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