The Arms Trade Treaty: Harnessing the Role of Legislators as Advocates and Lawmakers

Organized by
Parliamentarians for Global Action

By

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Excellencies,
Distinguished Members of Parliament,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please allow me at the outset to express my appreciation to Ambassador Dr. Palitha Kohona, Permanent Representative of Sri Lanka to the United Nations, for hosting this timely event and to thank you for inviting me to address this distinguished audience of Members of Parliament.

Without question, problems arising from the uncontrolled spread of conventional arms directly impact millions of people around the world. The largely unregulated arms trade abets violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, engenders civilian casualties, fuels humanitarian crises and hinders the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

It is striking that almost all areas of world trade are covered by regulations that bind countries into agreed conduct—yet there is still no global set of rules governing the arms trade. The regional and national arms transfer control measures that exist today are insufficient, as is quite apparent in repeated violations of Security Council arms embargoes, flagrant abuses of human rights, and large groups of people being deprived of opportunities for social and economic development.

The process towards negotiating an Arms Trade Treaty was launched in 2006 when the General Assembly established an expert group to consider the issue. Subsequently, preparatory meetings were held - in fact the fourth and last session of these preparatory meetings is currently taking place in New York. This preparatory process will culminate in a four-week diplomatic conference to be held here in New York this July.

This arms trade treaty would be the first treaty in the field of conventional arms trade to be negotiated within the framework of the United Nations—this is a truly historic development. Once concluded, this treaty has the potential to make a tangible positive impact on the security of so many people around the world.

The discussions on an arms trade treaty are now intensifying. It is encouraging to note that we are no longer talking about “if” an ATT will come to light, but rather “what” such a treaty would encompass.
While convergence on a number of topics is still elusive, it is reassuring to note that all Member States are committed to find common grounds on what is certainly a sensitive topic touching core issues of national sovereignty. There remain some questions on the ‘scope’ of the future treaty – that is to say what weapons systems would be included/covered by the treaty? Additionally, questions on some ‘criteria’ remain open for debate, such as for example: whether an arms shipment would contribute to regional security. We remain optimistic that a robust treaty would be agreed in July.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Members of Parliament,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are gathered here today to discuss the important role of Members of Parliament in the process of international negotiations, in particular in the run-up to what is widely expected to be a pivotal treaty on the international arms trade. As Parliamentarians, you are well placed to bring effective and meaningful change to your countries – and indeed to the world.

As representatives of the will of the people, you reflect diverse interests, and translate them into national laws.

Even more influential, is your role in ratifying international treaties and in enacting legislation and appropriating funds to implement such treaties.

Members of Parliament have also an all-important role in holding their governments accountable and ensuring that they abide by their international obligations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Progress towards concluding an arms trade treaty will clearly require strong and sustained support and political commitment from all concerned parties. Members of Parliament can play an important role in allocating budgets and advocating more involvement in these issues from their governments. This work is extremely important, given that those suffering most from the poorly regulated arms trade and the proliferation of weapons are civilians—the women and men, adolescents and children who experience blatant misuse of arms, and those living amid conflict and pervasive crime, often in conditions of poverty, deprivation and extreme inequality.
In closing, I wish to recognize and applaud the important role played by Parliamentarians for Global Action in promoting coordinated action at the inter-parliamentary level, and in supporting and providing impetus to important processes such as the arms trade treaty.

Thank you.