



Briefing Paper

Quaker United Nations Office - Geneva

Small Arms Review Conference Whimper

The Quaker United Nations Office has made small arms a major feature of its work in recent years. QUNO had a strong presence at the Review Conference, and brought representatives from the affected countries of Lebanon, Trinidad and Tobago, Kenya and Bangladesh. Here David Atwood gives his analysis of the disappointing results and explains why all is not lost.

The long-awaited Conference to review progress on the implementation of the 2001 UN Programme of Action “to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects” was held in New York, 26 June – 7 July. Its outcome will be nearly universally disappointing. In addition to a review of progress over the last five years, the meeting was to lay out a set of commitments and next steps for the future. In the end, no agreement proved possible. It did very little actual “review”. And, because the meeting produced no outcome document, including no “follow-on” processes, there are no formal “hooks” for the international community to look to for sustaining momentum on global action on small arms. These will now have to be developed through other means.

Seeing the whole picture

This result must not be seen as a reflection of the real situation with regard to work on small arms. One of the important features of the Review Conference in New York was the showcasing of the enormous range of work taking place around the world—by governments, by international organizations, and by civil society organizations. What this revealed—through publications, lunch-time seminars, films, national statements and other media—is just how far understanding has moved since 2001 and what real commitment exists globally to reduce the human impacts of small arms violence. For example, not only did this activity demonstrate the growing strength of a movement to develop global guidelines on the transfer of small arms (with considerable commitment to the development of a global Arms Trade Treaty) and new understanding of how action on small arms and development must be more effectively integrated. It also gave attention to new dimensions, such as the needs of the survivors of small arms violence. While a long way from a proper “review”, national governments also outlined in their national statements the efforts they are making to fulfill their obligations under the Programme of Action.

Civil society organizations, through the coordination of the International Action Network on Small Arms, gave the best evidence yet of citizen commitment to pressing for serious action by governments on small arms issues. Many governments worked tirelessly through the two weeks to achieve a range of clearly necessary next steps by the international community.

As history judges this moment of focused global attention to small arms, it will be important to keep these elements in mind, for they are the factors which will be critical in the next stages. And there will be next stages. However disappointing the two weeks in New York were from the standpoint of achieving a set of agreed commitments and next steps, it is clear that this does not signal the end of this movement. Far from it.



The limits of multilateral diplomacy

What the deliberations in New York do reveal, however, is further evidence that there is something seriously wrong with the current pattern of doing business on issues of arms control and disarmament, driven as it is by a consensus process which does not set the best outcome on the issue under concern as its goal. It is true that the crux of the failure lay in differences between those who wished to keep further action closely tied to a narrow interpretation of the Programme of Action and those who wished to build on the evident progress which has been made since 2001. However, the Review Conference also found itself victim of a larger set of political planes which currently devour nearly all issues in their path. These jointly conspired to make accommodation in the form of an outcome document of substance nearly impossible. By the end of the two weeks in New York, there was near consensus on only one thing—that this is no way to do business. Those who pushed so vigorously for a further review conference in 2012 are now having second thoughts about ever again putting an issue so critical as small arms into this kind of meat grinder.

What next?

The failure of the Review Conference to agree to any commitments to the future was one of the unexpected “outcomes” of this meeting. There was—on the part of all actors, even those who were determined to severely limit any future steps—an assumption that there would indeed be some next steps. These steps will now need to be constructed without the help (or the limits, it must be said) of a formal result of the Review Conference. In many ways, this could be a more positive result than had a truly inadequate document been issued, which was clearly the way the Conference was heading by the final day of negotiations.

The foundation for future actions will be based on the continuing viability of the Programme of Action. The non-result from New York has not undermined this. And the way is now open for groups of concerned states to move on issues such as transfer controls, stockpile management, and other issues. The First Committee of the General Assembly this autumn will now become a critical setting for those many states that clearly wanted a strong result from the Review Conference to set the agenda for the future. The possibility of voting will clearly be important to shaping clear and determined next steps which proved impossible in the Review Conference. “Coalitions of the willing” should now feel liberated to get on with taking steps where there are large numbers of states wishing there to be action.

The non-result of the Review Conference is a disgrace, considering what needs to be done. People around the world can justifiably feel severely let down by a process in which some governments put narrow regime interests and point-scoring above the need to reduce global suffering. A new road map now needs to be constructed, drawing on all the progress made and commitment expressed so energetically by the whole range of necessary actors in New York.

Whilst in New York members of the QUNO delegation wrote regular dispatches, which cover the joys of learning from other NGOs and the frustrations at the disintegration of a strong outcome. The dispatches highlight the importance of the activities on the periphery of the Review Conference that allowed NGOs to meet and share experiences of working to control small arms around the world.

“The large number of NGOs present has made it possible to learn from each other which will ultimately help us to review our own activities back home. We have also been able to collect materials from the conference which will provide additional knowledge and enable us to expand on our own activities.”

Rukia Subow (Kenya) and Nadira Mallick (Bangladesh), members of the QUNO delegation

The dispatches are available on the QUNO website: www.quno.org