



Secretary-General Kofi Annan (left) at the opening session of the UN Small Arms Review Conference, which ran from 26 June until 7 July at UN Headquarters in New York. Also present was Nobuaki Tanaka, Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs. 26 June, 2006, United Nations, New York.

In 2001, the United Nations held a landmark conference on small arms. The UN had only begun working on the small arms issue six years prior, spurred on by the 1995 publication of *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace*. Authored by former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the *Supplement* introduced the concept of “micro-disarmament” – controlling the millions of small arms and light weapons which Boutros-Ghali identified as the weapons “that are actually killing people in the hundreds of thousands.”

In 1996, following the publication of the *Supplement*, a UN Panel of Governmental Experts began to develop an action plan on small arms which eventually led to the 2001 UN small arms conference.

The 2001 UN Conference on the Illicit Trade of Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects produced a Program of Action (PoA) – a voluntary, politically-binding agreement that outlines state practices and priorities at the national, regional, and global levels for combating the uncontrolled proliferation of small arms and light weapons. In 2003 and 2005, UN Member States reconvened at the Biennial Meetings of States (BMS) to report their progress on implementing the PoA.

Last summer the states met yet again at a review conference to evaluate global implementation of the PoA, as well as to clarify

and elaborate on existing commitments within that agreement. However, the conference held in New York from June 26 through July 7 ended in complete failure.

The conference gave states an opportunity to outline their priorities for small arms action and their views on the UN small arms process through formal speeches. States also worked to negotiate an outcome document that would enunciate next steps for the United Nations on small arms. Over the course of two weeks, delegates met in a constant succession of formal and informal sessions, often working through the night to find common ground. However, as the conference reached its final hours, it became clear that negotiations were going nowhere. No agreement could be reached and no outcome document was adopted. In the end, no single factor or state caused the conference to fail. Indeed, the meeting was a perfect storm of domestic and international politics, and a flawed process which joined forces to leave the conference in deadlock.

So what went wrong? The conference’s failure can be blamed on both process and substance. First, the conference was held under the auspices of the United Nations, which prefers consensus based processes. The countries that opposed a particular issue were able to entirely block discussions on those topics instead of coming to a vote, which caused

many issues to remain unresolved. Second, because all countries were allowed to present their views in formal sessions, the conference ran out of time to complete difficult negotiations. Third, the resolution of controversial issues was held up by states who quibbled over insignificant issues or nitpicked word choices in the text of the outcome document to put on a showcase of their political posturing skills for domestic constituencies and interests. For example, the United States objected to any reference of illicit possession of weapons, even though U.S. law already contains such provisions, because the National Rifle Association strongly opposed any potential inferences to civilian possession of any kind.

From a substantive point of view, very few issues were controversial, but the procedural flaws allowed a few issues and a few states to hold the entire conference hostage.

Issues that sparked controversy at the conference were: the inclusion of language in the final document that linked small arms proliferation to development (opposed most strenuously by the United States and Indonesia); language that encouraged states to adopt national regulations against illicit trade, possession, and manufacture (opposed by the United States); language that stated the need for enhanced and enunciated transfer controls, including global principles for arms transfers (initially opposed by Iran, Cuba, and Pakistan, which permitted China and India to remain silent in their opposition; later opposed by the United States after a United Kingdom-brokered compromise gained the support of states who initially opposed); and concrete follow-up mechanisms (the United States was unwilling to consider future UN meetings). The inability of states to agree on these issues virtually paralyzed the proceedings and removed any hope that a compromise agreement could be reached.

Although the Review Conference did not

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result in a specific strategy for combating small arms at the global level, the United Nations will remain strongly engaged on the small arms issue. The PoA remains a useful framework for coordinated small arms work, and other UN small arms initiatives are already in the works. The October 2006 session of the First Committee – the UN Committee that develops resolutions on disarmament issues for the UN General Assembly – was an important venue for the further development of UN small arms efforts. Among the several resolutions subsequently adopted by the General Assembly on small arms was one that included a call for the next Biennial Meeting of States to be held no later than 2008. In addition, the General Assembly adopted a resolution that begins the process for an international arms trade treaty that would develop common international standards on the import, export, and transfer of conventional arms. By a vote of 153-1 – the United States was the only country to vote against the resolution – the General Assembly agreed to an exchange of views on the arms trade treaty and to convene an experts group to assess the feasibility and possible parameters of an arms trade treaty.

Processes already begun by the PoA are also continuing. In November 2006, a UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on brokering began their study of enhancing international cooperation on brokering controls, which will likely result in a future international instrument on arms brokering. States also met to review the implementation of the PoA mandated marking and tracing instrument in early 2007. These groups will continue to meet on a regular schedule in order to reach agreement on a way forward.

The failure of the UN Review Conference is appalling and regrettable. However, the majority of states and civil society groups worldwide remain committed to stopping this deadly scourge. The United Nations will remain a key player in the efforts to reign in the uncontrolled trade of small arms. And states are developing new UN initiatives that cannot be sidelined by the procedural and political issues that doomed the Review Conference to failure. The next five years will likely see significant results.

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Secretary-General Kofi Annan (at podium) speaking at the opening session of the UN Small Arms Review Conference, which ran from 26 June until 7 July at UN Headquarters in New York. He said that every year an estimated \$1 billion worth of small arms are traded illicitly worldwide, exacerbating conflict, sparking refugee flows, undermining the rule of law and spawning a “culture of violence and impunity.” 26 June, 2006, United Nations, New York