

Report on the Ninth Biennial Meeting of States to Consider the Implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons

Ten days after the dismal finale of the Eleventh Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference, roughly 140 nations met at the United Nations in New York for the biennial meeting on the illicit trade in small arms. The mostly constructive, even hopeful, proceedings were soured at the end by two states' concerns about issues not directly related to the trade in small arms and light weapons.

The convening of the Open-Ended Technical Experts Group took center stage at the opening session of the meeting. Sierra Leone's Permanent Representative chaired the group. The chair's summary of the experts' discussions addressed the opportunities and challenges of technical developments in tracking and interdicting illegal weapons movements; building capacity and sharing expertise to address the challenges outlined; and offered next steps for consideration during the interval before the next technical experts meeting in 2028.

In addition to the states at the meeting, a wide range of international governmental organizations and a more focussed group of regional and global nongovernmental organizations attended the meetings. Pax Christi International was one of the only NGOs broadly focussed on disarmament; the majority specialize in small arms, mines and the like. Fruitful side events were often presented by two or more of these organizations, including these side events:

- a) Conflict Armament Research findings on a study of obliterated weapons markings and their recovery;
- b) A UN-sponsored discussion about strengthening links between arms control efforts and the Women Peace and Security initiative; and
- c) Making Waves: Exploring Maritime Aspects of the Programme of Action on Small Arms.

The overall tone of the formal presentations and informal discussions was upbeat and focussed on measures to increase monitoring and interdiction of illicitly-traded small arms. Attendees frequently alluded to the problems posed by 3-D printed weapons and so-called ghost guns. Concern for these weapons fell into two categories: states threatSurprisingly, there was little discussion of artificial intelligence or drones throughout the meeting. The attendees agreed on common goals and shared experiences and innovations in the work to eliminate the illegal arms trade. An impressive level of regional and inter-regional cooperation was evident in this sharing of expertise and experiences, as was cooperation among the NGOs and international organizations working in this area.

At what was to be the final act, approval of the final outcome document, the first clear signs of dissent showed. First, the chair announced that there was no draft document to circulate and proposed delaying the final session of the meeting for an hour in order to emend the latest draft to take the objections of what he called "a very small number of parties" into consideration.

As it happened, the delay lasted two hours, and only two states initially objected to the text: Iran and the United States of America. Ironically, both parties objected to what they both called “gendered language” in one paragraph; the U.S.A. representative noted in a statement that U.S. law defines gender as the sex assigned to an infant at birth. Iran did not elaborate, but also objected to some of the language on maritime issues which it felt undermined its legitimate authority in its territorial waters.

For its part, the United States disassociated from a number of the paragraphs in the draft, including language about the exploitation of natural resources which the U.S. termed overly broad. Since there is still no text of the revised draft, much less a final document, it seems these dissensions have not yet been resolved.

Nicholas Mele, volunteering for Pax Christi International