

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE WORKING GROUP

XXXIVth MEETING

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Item 6: Controlling the Spread of Small Arms

SMALL ARMS PROLIFERATION: HUMANITARIAN IMPLICATIONS

There is growing awareness that small arms proliferation has profound humanitarian implications particularly in situations where civilians are deliberately targeted. The growth in small arms transfers and their role in the abuse of civilians, coupled with other concerns including increase in criminality and the drug trade, have given rise to a spate of initiatives at the inter-governmental, regional and national level.

There is also greater awareness of the need for better data on the impact of small arms proliferation for advocacy as well as disarmament, peace-building and other initiatives. While it is well understood that excessive expenditure on weapons, and their uncontrolled use, have important implications for the maintenance of law and order, for social and economic development and recovery from armed conflict, there is very little hard data available. The same is true in terms of the humanitarian implications. For example, it is often stated that the majority of civilian casualties in contemporary warfare are the result of small weapons use. However, it is difficult to substantiate such assertions even though it is clear that non-combatants are often the primary targets and continue to suffer from the large-scale availability of light weapons even after wars have ceased.

Need for Action by Humanitarian Agencies on Small Arms Proliferation?

A number of humanitarian and other actors, both in and outside the UN, have indicated the need for action on the humanitarian front as part of a comprehensive approach which tackles both supply and demand aspects of small arms proliferation.

The Department of Disarmament Affairs, as focal point on this issue, has established CASA (Coordinating Action on Small Arms) so as to ensure complementarity between different initiatives. At CASA and other meetings it is assumed that humanitarian agencies are in the best position (a) to provide insights on impact and (b) to take an active advocacy role.

In preparation for a discussion by the IASC Working Group, OCHA had a short background paper prepared to facilitate its own understanding of humanitarian thinking and concerns on this issue. One tentative finding is that even though many have the impression that humanitarian agencies are ideally situated to document the humanitarian implications of arms proliferation and misuse, relief personnel are not very conscious of this issue as a problem distinct from other

aspects of war and its impact on the people they are trying to help and their own ability to maintain access and humanitarian space. Thus, any action by humanitarian agencies would appear to first require consciousness-raising of their own personnel.

Better data on the impact of small arms on civilians would help alert relief personnel to programming as well as security concerns. In terms of a humanitarian response and the development of an overall strategy, it is clearly important that the use of arms against civilians and its impact on humanitarian space is taken into account. Greater knowledge of the impact of light weapons on civilians should help ensure that appropriate health care and other support services are available so as to reduce morbidity and mortality rates. Such information will also help identify protection needs and ways in which these can be addressed. Data on the impact of small arms use is also likely to be of help in the organization of improved security practices and procedures.

The availability of verifiable data which puts a face on victims will help stimulate public awareness and discourse on the necessity of measures which curb proliferation and reduce the vulnerability of civilians trapped in war zones. (and of refugees who have sought asylum but are at the mercy of armed elements in refugee camps.) Better data should also help highlight the problems which undermine the ability of humanitarian agencies to operate in war zones and put the lives of their workers at risk.

Comparable data from different parts of the humanitarian community would, in all probability, contribute to better insights to the problem and measures which can be taken to both prevent and alleviate the problem. Verifiable data will also increase the credibility of humanitarian and others actors involved in advocacy and preventive action. By contrast, anecdotal evidence and statements based on impressions can be deconstructed, ignored, or dismissed and prove counter-productive to the overall advocacy aims. In a recent discussion on this issue, a member of the International Action Network on Small Arms stressed that none of the efforts to develop indicators to track changes in arms flows *“should be seen as taking away from the importance of the most critical indicator, the impact in the form of human damage done by these weapons. It does not take a military expert to report on a daily basis the number of people killed or injured by hand grenades in Guatemala and El Salvador. Anin the end it is those types of data that will enhance the growth of the coalition of the like-minded states who are beginning to coalesce around the desire to rid the world of these excessive weapons and their effects”*.

Data Collection on Impact: Methodological and Other Concerns

An important concern which has been expressed by many humanitarian agencies is the risk of undermining the security of relief personnel involved in data collection. Clearly, any data collection on humanitarian impact must be undertaken in a manner which does not jeopardize either the safety or work of relief personnel. It is possible that some data, for example, on mortality and morbidity rates as a result of firearm use, is already available even though in many situations such information would not be representative of the population as a whole.

Similarly, some data is probably available from human rights and other groups involved in documenting the impact of war on civilians. However, given the limited experience of humanitarian agencies in documenting the impact of arms proliferation and misuse, it is unlikely that relief personnel could begin to systematically collect data without proper guidance and help essential for understanding the causes and context of civilian mortality, injury, psycho-social trauma, rape, assault, robbery, and other quantifiable aspects of suffering as a result of small arms use against non-combatants.

Proposal for IASC Consideration

It is proposed that the IASC Working Group decides to take action on the issue of small arms. Specifically, this will involve action (a) in terms of advocacy on the humanitarian implications of small arms proliferation and misuse and (b) the collection of data essential for an effective advocacy programme.

It is proposed that the IASC Working Group establish a small Reference Group to identify the modalities for collecting verifiable information on humanitarian implications in a cost effective manner and to map out the elements of an Advocacy Strategy taking into account the comparative advantages of humanitarian agencies.

In terms of structured data collection, OCHA proposes the organization of three to four case studies in different contexts including, for example, in a country such as Burundi where weapons were not readily available until relatively recently and in a country, such as Afghanistan, where weapons were part of the culture but strong taboos inhibited their use against civilians.

It is further proposed that the Reference Group also identify other aspects of impact beyond humanitarian concerns (eg link between an emerging crisis/growing insecurity and proliferation and the development and other costs to such societies) which would help explain the full picture on the repercussions of light weapons proliferation so that others can be encouraged to undertake such research.