

Parliamentary Response Small Arms Related Violence

Presentation by Mr Peter Weiderud, General Secretary of the Parliamentary Forum on SALW

Moderator

Honourable Members of Parliaments in West Africa

Dear Friends and Colleagues

It is a pleasure for me and the Parliamentary Forum to share with you some of our experiences from the parliamentary reflection on policies and ideas on how to reduce violence, to prevent conflicts from going violent and to coop with the plague of small arms proliferation.

Wars and response to wars do not normally need advocates. When the fire is on, it is usually possible to mobilize the financial, diplomatic or military resources needed to deal with the emergency. However, it is more difficult to muster the resources needed to ensure that the fire never started, although we know that these efforts are cheaper, more efficient and would save thousand of human lives.

This is a dilemma in international affairs, similar to the one in medicine, where it is the heart surgeon who is considered the hero, while the dietician who can prevent heart attacks more efficient is given less attention. The international community will never be able to drum up all the resources needed if we are to wait and respond to conflicts after their out break.

Prevention of violent conflict is the civilised, sustainable and political responsible way to act. However, it does not come by itself. It needs mobilization of political will. The Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons is the only global organization for parliamentarians with the specific objective of preventing armed violence and small arms proliferation.

Over the last few years there has been a clear development of the work of the Forum moving from a focus on control issues, such as illegality and non-proliferation, towards a deeper and wider approach, aimed at comprehensively targeting armed violence. This is a natural and most welcome development, not only to address the symptoms of violence, but also to deal with the root causes, and ultimately try to prevent conflicts from being solved violently.

Moderator,

Since the UN Charter was signed more than 30 million people have been killed in armed conflicts. 26 million of these have been killed by fire arms.

The proliferation of small arms constitutes a threat to human development, good governance and democratic consolidation. Fewer weapons mean higher levels of human security and lower probability that conflicts escalate and become violent. In this sense, measures to stop the spread and accumulation of small arms can be considered conflict prevention.

There are both direct and indirect effects of the use, trade and proliferation of arms. Small arms kill more than half a million people every year. They are the weapon of choice in gang violence, organised crime, civil wars and inter-state conflicts for a number of reasons. They are cheap and have often a simple technology, which means that virtually anyone can buy and use a weapon. They have a long life span and are easy to maintain, which means they often outlast conflicts and can be used again years later. AK-47s used in the Vietnam War have been found 30 years later in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

There are over 600 million weapons in circulation in the world – 60 per cent of which are owned by civilians. However, unlike weapons of mass destruction, there are still no global conventions or treaties that deal with small arms.

The Forum currently works on a number of issues which are all closely related to conflict prevention, reduction of armed violence and small arms proliferation. I will bring up some aspects related to these:

1. ATT

The Forum has always paid strong attention to arms transfers. It has done so by advocating for compliance with the 2001 UN Program of Action on Small Arms, the 2001 UN Firearms Protocol and several regional instruments with a relevance to international transfers, such as the 2006 ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and the 2004 Nairobi Protocol on Firearms.

An Arms Trade Treaty would be a timely codification and development of international law in regards of non-proliferation and arms control. There is need for a comprehensive instrument: combining all conventional weapons, targeting all types of international arms transfers and containing requisites of both a procedural and material nature.

The Forum welcomes the progress made at the last UN General Assembly when a resolution to start the process was passed with a strong majority. The largest arms producer, the US, got on board provided that the treaty will be negotiated on the basis of consensus. There is a risk that this will give a too strong role to the reluctant countries.

And here I do not refer to the US. A workable ATT needs the main arms producer fully on board. I am rather concerned with countries that are reluctant to have strong human rights criteria in a treaty. This gives an important role to parliamentarians to closely follow and put pressure on their respective government.

2. Privatisation of the security sector

Since the end of the 1990's, states have increased the outsourcing of functions, which were traditionally undertaken by military or police, to private contractors.

That is not to say that the privatisation of security cannot make a valuable contribution to security. However, of central concern is the lack of legitimacy and accountability.

Poor national legislation and limited international conventions and structures have an impact of human rights. This development might also challenge the state monopoly of the use of force and make security available primarily to those who can afford it.

The role of the state is to provide security as a common good - equally to all citizens and in a way that upholds human rights and democratic principles. Private security providers are responsible to their shareholders and company owners, and if not properly managed and regulated, they can present a risk to the development of a stable democratic state, or undermine established democratic and accountable security institutions.

There is a strong need to formulate legislative and regulatory framework, also on the international level, for the private security sector and develop effective mechanisms for

control and oversight in order to better address the growth and expansion of the private security industry;

3. Gender

Although the majority of the users and casualties of small arms are men, firearms affect the life of women in a number of ways. Widows are left alone to fight for the survival of the family, small arms are used to terrorise women and they facilitate crimes such as rape and other forms of sexual abuse.

Since women and men do not participate in war in the same way, they have different experiences. One very important aspect is that women are far too often excluded from peace negotiations and their special needs and their important experiences are not taken into account. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security stresses the importance of women's equal and full participation as active agents in peace and security and addresses how women and children are affected by war, the importance of women's participation in conflict resolution and recognizing the under-valued and under-utilized contributions women make in preventing conflict, peacekeeping and peace-building.

However, it is difficult, even for the UN, to implement these recommendations in the field.. It is often argued that the culture of the specific country or area where the conflict takes place makes it difficult for women to participate in negotiations. But this is exactly the problem addressed in Resolution 1325. If not even the UN can adhere to these recommendations, how can we expect other groups and organisations to do so?

Another aspect is that attitudes of women may sometimes contribute towards the cultural condition that equates masculinity with the possession and use of a firearm, making it acceptable for men to use arms or glorify guns. By openly encourage men to fight they support the attitudes and stereotypes promoted by the culture of arms.

It is important for parliamentarians to be aware of and address these cultural aspects. A successful example of this was made by our partner Viva Rio, who worked with female teenager in the violent fawelas. After the workshop the girls started to wear T-shirts with a crossed over gun and the text message to their boyfriends that you have to chose between me or the gun. A modern version of the classical Greek story of Lysistrate.

4. Stockpiling of conventional ammunition

Once a month there is an accidental explosive event, somewhere in the world. The result is altogether thousands of deaths and destruction of livelihoods, housing as well as high costs of health care, disposal clearance, environmental damage and loss of direct and indirect income.

Ammunition recovery and stockpiling is not only a post-conflict responsibility, but a conflict prevention measure. Unsecured stockpiles allow the diversion of ammunition to illicit uses, which can increase fatalities arising from armed crime and violence.

Despite the risks, conventional ammunition stockpiles continue to receive relatively little international attention. Stockpile management has not been addressed comprehensively in relevant regional and global instruments. At the national level, many states do not have sufficient legislation, or sometimes even safe operational procedures, governing the safe and secure storage of conventional ammunition.

It is important to develop, implement and enforce national legislation, supported by effective operational procedures. Donors need to deepen their political and financial engagement with program and projects designed to improve the standards of stockpile management of conventional ammunition; and in particular for surplus destruction.

The Forum has produced a handbook for parliamentarians with specific proposals how to best take their responsibilities to ensure proper stockpiling.

5. Aid and security

The interplay between development and security are at the forefront of the political agenda. It became more visible during the 1990's due to the recognition of significant armed conflicts in developing countries and with the growing concern with crime and violence in developing and rapidly urbanising economies. Inequality, underdevelopment and poor governance came to be seen by policy-makers and researchers as the root of conflict.

After 9/11, tendencies in the debate suggested that the links between poverty and terrorism are inseparable, that funds towards poverty reduction will reduce terrorism. As a result, aid funds was redirected to serve military purposes and thus contributed to the securitisation of development but not necessarily the other way around.

If this trend should continue, there is a risk that the security and development for poor people in the south will be seen as important only if it will lead to security in the developed world.

Although the links between security, development and human rights are obvious, there is not enough evidence to say that poverty as such causes war or terrorism. On the other hand, people in transition and people facing strong horizontal inequalities are more prone to engage in violent conflict.

It is of outmost importance to be very careful when dealing with these issues and allocating funds. Development cooperation needs to be safeguarded in its own right. The Forum supports present OECD-DAC policies on the relationship between security and development, reaffirming that the proliferation of small arms negatively affects development

6. Religion and conflict

Along with ethnicity, nationality, language and class, religion is an important part of a person's identity and can be considered an essential bearer of culture, tradition and history as well as a major social force that serves to bind a community together.

Throughout history religion has been used as a pretext for conflict, violence and war, and after the end of the Cold War, religion has re-entered both the world stage as well as conflict areas, challenging some of the modern understanding of secularism.

At the same time, religious leaders have held important positions in peace and reconciliation processes in many conflict-ridden societies and have contributed to the promotion of peace and the reduction of violence all over the world.

Including religious authorities in the process of peacemaking and reconciliation can provide a dimension of legitimacy that secular authorities may lack. For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in post-apartheid South Africa was lead by prominent religious leaders rather than lawyers and judges.

Hence, there need to be a political awareness and interaction from parliamentarians with religions in order both to make use of their possible contribution to peaceful development, as well as counteract their potentially destructive role in situations of political tension.

In West Africa, the tension between Christians and Muslims has grown significantly over the last ten years. However, in countries and contexts where Muslim and Christian leaders have formed inter-religious councils, the communities have found mechanisms to decrease tension and prevent the spread of conflict.

Such mechanisms is the best way to vaccinate against aggressive fundamentalism and help leaders from all religions to formulate a common code of conduct in times of conflict and social unrest in order to prevent religion from becoming a pretext for violence and discrimination.

Moderator,

These, and some other issues, are more comprehensively developed in the different policy statements adopted by the Parliamentary Forum. Please feel free to take sample of those and make the best possible use of them in our continued discussion today or in your future work.

Let me finally mention the successful method of a model law, which the Forum has developed together with Parlatino, the Latin America Parliament. By providing a unique framework, which combine control as well as disarmament aspects of small arms, we have been able to offer a working tool for parliamentarians to use in comparing their own country's legislation with this tool.

We are currently working on providing a similar tool for African needs, should there be such an interest also in the African context.

I thank you for your kind attention.