

Report

Roundtable discussion on overcoming political obstacles to disarmament: the role of legislators

Monday 26 October, 2009
UN Conference Room 9
UN Headquarters, New York
1:15-2:45 pm

Organizers:

Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons,
Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (PNND)
Mayors for Peace

Hosted by the Permanent Mission of Sweden to the UN

Summary

The main speakers were: Sonia Escudero (Argentina), Secretary General of Parlantino and President of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons, MP Hans Raidel (Germany) board member of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons and member of Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, and Aaron Tovish, Executive Advisor and Campaign Director for Mayors for Peace. The discussion was moderated by Peter Weiderud, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons.

The main topics of discussion were:

- What are the differences and similarities of mayors and parliamentarians when working against the proliferation of arms, both nuclear and conventional?
- What is the scope of cooperation between mayors and parliamentarians with regard to these issues?
- How does one best create a strong and universally adherent Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) – consensus or other?

The main conclusions reached were that mayors and parliamentarians have somewhat different roles in the work against arms proliferation. Mayors have the advantage of being closer to their constituents whilst parliamentarians have the possibility to affect governments that promote misleading approaches. There is a large scope for cooperation between mayors and parliamentarians and it is important to develop it further through, for example, a pilot project. Further more there is a need for improving the information that reaches the people and here mayors play an important part.

There was a slight disagreement regarding the best way to achieve a strong ATT. It was recognized that the interests of the arms producers are strong and difficult to influence. There are, however, ways, as shown by Norway who promote a disinvestment campaign against companies involved in the production of cluster munitions.

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Sonia Escudero started with a presentation of the Parliamentary Forum in Small Arms and Light Weapons (here after the Forum) where she explained that it is the only global network of parliamentarians specifically dedicated to issues related to arms control, disarmament and the prevention of gun violence. She further emphasized the importance of having a deep and comprehensive view of the problem of small arms and stressed the need to target the problem from various angles and with reference to a range of factors. She underlined that the problem is very different in different parts of the world. Even though, for example, Western Europe is not as badly affected by gun related violence, as for example Central America, where the homicide rates are alarming, this is where we find the major producers of small arms and light weapons. There is therefore a need to work for proper control of exports as well as the reduction of surpluses in these countries. The Forum sees a strong Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) with universal adherence as a priority. However, she did express her concern regarding the possibility to produce an effective treaty if too much emphasis is put on reaching consensus. She therefore, on behalf of the Forum, encouraged the first committee to open for some alternative to consensus.

Hans Raidel spoke on behalf of Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (PNND) and emphasized the importance of the recent positive development on the issue of global proliferation of nuclear arms. He pointed to the fact that there has recently been a new trust created within the international community, in large part crediting this to a new commitment to disarmament from the Obama-administration, who has put the issue of nuclear weapons/disarmament back on the international agenda.

He further declared that after a disappointing review conference on the Nuclear Arms Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2005, there is an even greater need to work for a strong NPT. He stated that there is a need to establish a sense of common purpose within the national community. The state parties connected to the NPT are facing a range of issues and there is a need to support diplomatic efforts and to use the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to work for a new momentum on the issue of nuclear disarmament and he emphasized the need to prevent the creation of nuclear technology for military ends.

The positive aspects, he said, are the change in U.S. policy and the fact that Germany has adopted new conventions on regular arms. However, he also emphasized the risk of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and the fact that there are disagreements regarding the best way to achieve nuclear disarmament.

Aaron Tovish (Mayors for Peace) started by describing the effects of committed parliamentarians that he had witnessed while working for international networks such as Parliamentarians for Global Action. When governments are stalled out, he said, parliamentarians can work as a catalyst to get negotiations going. As an example of this he mentioned the Six Nation Peace Initiative. The countries represented in this initiative were Sweden, Argentina, Tanzania, Greece, Mexico and India. At that time, the nuclear states were not talking to each other and this created a general fear among populations.

However this fear was not reflected at the international level. Here the parliamentarians intervened and were able to get countries to work together in an intensive debate. This initiative provided Gorbachov with a point of reference on which he could act without risking his reputation.

The second aspect that he mentioned was the Moscow Treaty. This led to the ban of nuclear testing in the atmosphere. He also pointed to the convening of an amendment conference on nuclear weapons due to actions taken by non-nuclear states with the aim to eliminate nuclear weapons. Three quarters of the nuclear states agreed to continue the work initiated by this conference. The United States was not one of them. However, they eventually agreed to pursue the line of action taken by the other states.

He presented these examples of how parliamentarians can use their knowledge to get things moving and explained that this also is the reason why Mayors for Peace are working to create networks.

He went on to explain how the role of mayors gives them a strong incentive to work against nuclear weapons and why they are suited to take on these issues. Mayors are working closely with their constituents and since they run cities they are immediately faced by the threat of nuclear weapons. They support the abolition of nuclear weapons and are in some ways ahead of parliamentarians on this issue.

He spoke about a readiness among mayors to cut through the details of the NPT and mentioned that Mayors for Peace will be taking an overarching approach to rid the world of these types of weapons. The framework for action is the Nagasaki Protocol. Further, he explained that Mayors for Peace are hoping to be able to have a meeting in Hiroshima to adopt a process for starting negotiations at the governmental level after the NPT – conference.

According to Aaron Tovish, Mayors for Peace argues that there are no practical obstacles to why the goal of a world without nuclear weapons in 2020 cannot be reached. This has developed into a Mayors for Peace - project called the 2020 vision. Almost all governments want this to happen but there is a need for solid commitment to be able to produce results.

The mayors engaged in Mayors for Peace represent almost 600 million people and they are working to reach 5000 members. In that case it would mean the representation of almost one billion people.

With regard to a question directed to him by Christer Winbäck (MP Sweden), concerning his views on the role of parliamentarians as opposed to that of Mayors, Aron Tovish emphasized the close relationship that Mayors for Peace have with PNND and argued that parliamentarians have a more sophisticated knowledge on these issues. He pointed out that parliamentarians have the ability to take on governments who promote misleading approaches but he also meant that mayors have the advantage of being closer to their constituents. He acknowledged that there is great scope for cooperation between mayors and parliamentarians, and that Mayors for Peace is currently looking into how to better

cooperate with PNND. He considered it to be of great value to can get parliamentarians and mayors together to discuss cooperation.

Francisco Plancarte (President of Planetafilia) who has been engaged in various NGOs said that he, as a lawyer, had been able to look at the possible transformation of the UN into a world federation from a legal point of view.

He went on to describe the problem of the right to veto. To pass a resolution in the General Assembly there is the need to get two thirds of the votes which is very difficult. He instead discussed the possibility to propose, as a legal procedure, a resolution to transform the UN charter to better represent the peoples of the member states. And as a second step, initiate a legal procedure to transform the UN into a world federation.

Alyn Ware (PNND) recognized that despite the differences the engaged organizations are all working to create national consciousness, whether it is with regard to nuclear weapons or small arms and the core of the efforts made is the same.

He went on to emphasize the importance of learning from the experience gained when discussing non proliferation of nuclear weapons when entering the process of the ATT. He pointed out that it is not necessary to have the support of the bigger states from the start. If a ban on nuclear testing among some states can be achieved, it is possible to use a so called “entry into force negotiation”. This is not legally binding until all have signed but it allows for the negotiations to proceed. It has been shown that even if states have not signed an agreement the very fact that they have signed on for the negotiations means that they are likely to honour it.

He also acknowledged the positive news that the German government is working to remove nuclear weapons stationed in their country and the nuclear weapons issue is going forward with Barack Obama and the UN Secretary General has put forward a plan for nuclear weapons.

Pol D'Huyvetter – (Mayors for peace, Belgium) also mentioned the ongoing cooperation between Mayors for Peace and PNND. He pointed out that in Belgium, 60% of the mayors have signed on for Mayors for Peace. He also stressed that parliamentarians and mayors have been effective in many ways when meeting with ministers. The fact that cities should not be considered as targets is very clear to mayors, and the fact that they are should be considered illegal.

He explained that he thought that PNND and Belgian mayors and NGOs can form an interesting coalition and opted for an effort to get the negotiations going. Here, he said, mayors can play an important part.

He then went on to express his interest in the work of the Parliamentary Forum on SALW as the issue of small arms is of great interest to mayors. As a lot of money is being put into weapons instead of security he asked for input from the Forum as to if there is anything the Mayors for Peace could do to assist in the efforts.

Manuel de Araujo pointed to the crucial role played by parliamentarians for the domestication of several treaties like the Nuclear Free Zone treaty and that PNND provided the tools for this. He also mentioned that the role of parliamentarians tends to stop after the domestication and that mayors have a large role in providing information to the people in the aftermath of the domestication. He went on to discuss the role of mayors with regard to small arms and light weapons. He meant that cities are not only vulnerable to nuclear weapons but also to the spread of small arms as these provide a more immediate threat to the people. He suggested a pilot project between the Parliamentary Forum and the Mayors for Peace where either Rio de Janeiro or Johannesburg could be used as a base. He hoped that such a project could be used to make both parliamentarians and mayors more aware of the problem, and also demonstrate ways in which these representatives of the people can work together to create a culture of peace and non - violence.

The representative from the Argentinean delegation commented on the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). Here Argentina has an important role to play as they are chairing the process. She mentioned the role of Argentina in trying to achieve a consensus, and pointed to the difficulty of this task. As this is not a typical disarmament issue and there are many commercial implications and she emphasized the importance of having the leading countries of the international trade of arms engaged in the process. She went on by acknowledging the positive development during this year, as the new stand point of the U.S. also brings Russia and China to the table. She emphasized the need for the establishment of common standards. She continued by promoting the consensus approach and stressed that agreements within the UN have all been reached with consensus and to ensure universality it is important to make sure that everyone is on board.

She finished off by posing a question regarding how to advance the regional agenda of Latin America (as Latin America has a special problem with regard to small arms) when there are so many things going on at the moment and the agenda is full.

Alyn Ware commented on this by stressing the importance of not letting the manufacturers dedicate the agenda. He meant that they would be happy about the consensus approach as it would make it easy to block progress. He stressed that the treaties that have been achieved have not been reached through the consensus approach. And he wondered if it would be possible to have a process for a strong treaty without being held back by consensus issues.

In answer to a question posed by a journalist regarding how to deal with the strong interests of producers within the military sector, he mentioned that Norway is promoting disinvestment in cluster munitions and wondered if something similar can be done regarding SALW.

Closing statements/remarks

Aron Tovish finished by pointing to the fact that there is a gap between the issue of small arms and the issue of weapons of mass destruction. The issue of small arms is in large related to criminality. When the violence escalates into explosive force, as it has done in, for example, Brazil, the situation has gone really bad and he stressed the commitment of Mayors for Peace in the area of explosive violence.

Hans Raidel stressed the importance of having a process of disarmament that starts from the people. He continued by demanding that work must be done to improve the information that reaches the people.

Sonia Escudero gave her recognition to the importance of cooperation between parliamentarians and mayors. She also mentioned the difficulties encountered in Argentina in trying to push for a reform of the outdated arms legislation. She explained that the model law for the control of arms, developed at the request of Parlatino, the Latin American parliament, has been a success in countries that do not produce small arms but almost impossible to implement in countries like Argentina that do produce small arms. The producers clearly have a strong voice in these matters and they are hindering the process from moving forward.