



PARLIAMENTARY FORUM
ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

Policy Statement on the links between the illicit drugs and arms trade

The General Assembly of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting in the Congress of the Republic of Colombia on the 22nd and 23rd of November 2010;

The illicit small arms trade forms part of an extensive shadow economy in which weapons are one of many commodities, including drugs, timber, precious stones, endangered species, and even human beings. Rebel groups, non-state actors and various forms of organized crime are part of and use the profits made from the sale of these commodities to purchase weapons to protect their operations. Furthermore, these complex networks are deeply integrated into the global economy and those who take advantage of them are experts in finding new innovative ways to exploit both the legal and the illegal side. The illicit drug trade is often carried out by highly sophisticated organizations that are in many ways comparable to multinational companies. There is evidence that many non-state actors use the illicit drugs trade as a source of income to fund their armed struggles.

The problem is global and drugs are exchanged for arms in many parts of the world. For instance, around 30 percent of the cocaine consumed annually in Europe passes through West Africa. It is common that humans are taken advantage of in this process since most of these drugs are transported to Europe on commercial flights by drug mules,¹ which is extremely dangerous and often even life-threatening. Upon arrival, the cocaine is predominantly distributed by West African criminal networks working throughout Europe.

Drug trafficking routes often overlap gun trafficking routes perfectly and the reason behind this is that the same methods, actors and networks are involved. The supply and demand side is reversed, given that arms production and the demand for illicit drugs are found in the north, whereas illicit drugs production and the demand for weapons are found in the South. There is a tendency among the countries setting the agenda in the West to focus on the demand for weapons and the supply of drugs, hence placing the principal responsibility for the problems which arise on developing countries in the South. This leads to an unbalanced debate on supply and demand as well as difficulties in taking proper political responsibility. To address the problems arising from the illicit trade of small arms and drugs, equal attention must be given to the supply and demand for both of these commodities in both the North and the South.

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Many of the agents involved in the illegal drugs trade acquire arms; from the primary production stage where farmers possess small arms, to the couriers accompanied by armed bodyguards, to the more heavily armed cartels which use more sophisticated automatic and semi-automatic weapons. Arms can also be traded for human beings, with women and children the usual victims. There is evidence to suggest that children in some countries are abducted and used not only in criminal and armed activities but also being victims of human trafficking or exchanged for guns.

Efforts to control small arms proliferation are failing for a variety of reasons. The relationship between drugs and arms is complex and the networks involved in trafficking are poorly understood and information about them largely inadequate.

More joint operations together with border cooperation between state agencies such as customs, the police and other actors as well as improved border protection is necessary. The Mérida Initiative is an ongoing cooperation between the United States and Mexico that broadens and deepens their bilateral cooperation against transnational drug trafficking organizations and organized crime, as well as the illicit transfer of weapons. There is a need to deepen mutual border control, using existing methods, by prescribing responsibilities more efficiently and reinforcing laws. In the case of the Merida initiative, a stronger focus on the part of the United States to curb the flow of weapons, and by Mexico to curb the flow of drugs and human trafficking, could be more efficient than the strategy currently being pursued.

Inequality and exclusion are main factors fuelling the trafficking of arms and drugs. The arms trade has no respect for human security and social welfare. Trafficking also has an impact on human rights, education and discrimination, mainly victimizing women and children.

Even though countries have laws which forbid the arms and drugs trade there are often difficulties in enforcing these laws. Non-enforced laws are often due to corruption among government officials which is another of the factors fuelling the drugs and arms trade.

The trades in illicit drugs and arms have the potential to continue to spiral, partly due to the constantly changing nature of criminal networks. This is also due to factors related to globalization, such as the ability to circulate capital, people and information from one country to another. Non-state actors constantly change the methods they use for illicit trafficking and, as such, addressing the issue will require not only regulatory measures but also cooperation and the continuous exchange of information.

Objectives

The General Assembly of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting in the Congress of the Republic of Colombia on the 22nd and 23rd of November 2010;

Recognizes the links between trafficking in drugs and arms that must be combated simultaneously from the perspectives of both supply and demand;

Affirms that a global perspective is needed to strengthen international cooperation on criminal matters, incorporating new strategies and practical measures in order to suppress criminal activities;

Highlights the responsibility of each state to cooperate through all social institutions, both at the political level and through information-sharing, in developing combined strategies with other countries to raise awareness on the consequences of the illicit transfer of drugs and small arms, and that the trafficking of arms and drugs require a multi-faceted response;

Stresses the importance of strengthening international law enforcement to fight corruption and the illegal capital flow stemming from drugs trade and organised crime;

Recognises that the effective prevention of trafficking requires proactive cooperation between law enforcement agencies and communities;

Points out the need for deeper border cooperation between countries involving both customs, police and other actors;

Understands that constant revision and modernization of combat strategies is required in order to respond to new methods used by non-state actor networks to carry out illicit trafficking;

Draws attention to the role of parliamentarians in awareness-raising on drugs and arms in all its complexity and the impact it has on human security;

Calls for cooperation between legislators from supply and demand countries to elaborate international as well as national plans of action;

Highlights that ratification of international agreements is essential to combat small arms, and urges all governments to reach an agreement on a comprehensive Arms Trade Treaty as soon as possible;

Mandates the Forum to facilitate and monitor exchanges between legislators on issues related to the illicit transfer of drugs and arms;