



PARLIAMENTARY FORUM
ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

Policy Statement on Media and Small Arms and Light Weapons

The General Assembly of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting in Arusha, Tanzania, October 26, 2008

The influence of the media; as a source of information, education and entertainment; has an important role on the development of cultural orientations, social views and beliefs. It has the ability to reach large numbers of people effectively and cheaply. However, there also risks for societies associated with excessive violence in the media which can affect all sectors of the population, especially young people and children. Other risks occur when the media is used by different actors to instigate or hide violent conflicts; and when the safety of journalists is threatened during times of social crisis or war.

Traditional media like radio, television and newspapers, usually have a positive and informative role in society. The media play an important role in conflict reduction, imparting essential humanitarian information and in building a stronger civil society. However, there are documented cases of the media being manipulated by factors that instigate violence or of media actors becoming the victim of harassment and intimidation.

The media has enormous potential to bring citizens and civil society together. This power can, however, sometimes contribute in negative ways which often result in an increase in violence. Exposure to media violence through aggressive scripts and depictions of violence can lead to a tendency to imitate, especially in the case of children, and might contribute to the escalation of tensions and conflicts.

The UNESCO Global Media Violence Study shows that children spend at least 50% of their time out of school watching television, making them particularly susceptible to exposure to aggressive images. According to the American Academy of Paediatrics and the American Psychological Association, a child will have watched an average of 200,000 acts of violence including 40,000 murders on television by the time they reach 18 years of age. Children are affected at any age, but young children are most vulnerable to the effects of media violence.

Another issue of great concern is the role the media plays in conflicts. New communications technologies such as mobile/video phones and laptop computers are allowing journalists to gather and disseminate information with increasing ease. This makes it possible for the international community access information regarding new conflicts more quickly which in turn means that crimes and rights violations are less likely to go unnoticed and, more importantly, unpunished.

In a number of conflicts however, the media has been used as a tool to instigate and accelerate an escalation into violent conflict and there are many documented cases of the media being manipulated by actors' intent on achieving such results. There is no doubt that media control has often become one of the most powerful weapons of extreme political movements as a means to divide communities, induce the terrorisation of minority groups, and directly promote mass violence.

Politics and power play important roles in defining who listens to, watches or reads various forms of media. The media environment is often heavily regulated for political reasons in order to ensure that the national government has a monopoly over broadcasting institutions and thus the dissemination of information. In many poor countries, propaganda is spread through mass media outlets as a way for weak or failed states to try and legitimate their activities.

A further concern is related to press freedom. The safety of journalists is threatened in times of social crisis and war. Regulatory frameworks often become repressive, and serve as a formidable obstacle to exercising freedom of expression and journalistic protection.

The result of such repression is that journalists often go into exile or get killed. According to the organisation Reporters Without Borders at least 81 journalists were killed in 2006 in 21 countries for simply doing their job or expressing their opinion. At least 871 media workers were detained around the world in 2006, some for just a few hours but others sentenced to many years in prison.

Gathering information is sometimes not enough and media coverage can play a central role in reducing irrational prejudices, avoiding the escalation of conflict, and confronting extremist political agendas. It is thus important to promote fair, accurate and in depth, media coverage to protect diversity, strengthen human and minority rights, promote understanding between different social groups and uphold the freedom of expression.

An independent media can place pressure on governments by broadcasting news items and features that question official lines or existing government policies or practices.

The media also plays an important role in the creation of a strong civil society. In a country with different cultural, economic and social contexts, the media is one of the civil society actors which can shape the direction of social change, bring together different views, calm regional tensions and, most importantly, educate people particularly children.

Excessive exposure to violence, the violation of press freedoms and the intimidation of the media can contribute to an aggressive culture where guns are often viewed as a personal solution to endemic and systemic social and economic problems. Furthermore, it can generate an escalation of ethnic, nationalist and religious conflicts and in turn increase the demand for SALW.

The media is the most powerful tool for helping civil society to put principles into action and create more effective participation by providing accurate information. The main role of the media related to armed violence should be to encourage values based on universal Human Rights in support of the problems relating to SALW, and the protection children.

The spread of reliable information and non aggressive images is essential in order to shape public knowledge. In this context, the media can help to reinforce good citizenship and strengthen a culture of non-violence

Objectives

The General Assembly of the Parliamentary Forum of Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting in Arusha, Tanzania on October 26, 2008;

Recognizes and supports the importance of media, as the fourth pillar of governance, in disseminating reliable information and encourages engagement with the media in promote responsible coverage of violence and small arms issues;

Supports the members of the Forum and their parliamentarian colleagues to call for the prominent engagement of civil society and the media in efforts to strengthen the role of the media in conflict prevention and management, improve regulatory mechanisms to avoid excessive media violence and guarantee freedom from intimidation for journalist;

Underscores the need for political and legislative commitments to ensure the role of the media regarding the process of conflict prevention and the promotion of the values of non-violence and a culture of peace;

Urges the implementation, development and enforcement of national legislation to ensure the non-intimidation of journalists and protection of press freedoms during times of war and social crisis;

Recommends developing the capacity of the media to promote a culture of non-violence reaffirming the importance of freedom of the press and freedom from intimidation;

Mandates the Board and the Secretariat to follow the development of the issues of media violence and press freedom and take action in line with the adopted policy.