



PARLIAMENTARY FORUM
ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

Policy Statement on Minorities, Violence and SALW

Board of the Parliamentary Forum of Small Arms and Light Weapons,
meeting in Berlin, Germany on February 15, 2009;

Societies are built by communities, peoples and nations. The various groups in a society can differ in terms of geographic location, religion, customs and identity, and can form a majority as well as a minority.

A minority can be a group of significant number in a society and may include any group that differs with respect to another dominant group. They form a non-dominant sector of a society and may wish to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral culture, territory, or identity, as the basis of their continued existence as a people, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and sometimes even legal systems.

The situation of minorities can vary greatly from country to country and consequently require a range of approaches. There is no universally accepted definition of minorities; the word is interpreted differently in separate societies and will depend in most cases depending on who holds power. Those working to secure rights for minority groups generally describe a minority as a non-dominant group of individuals who share certain national, ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics that are different to those of the majority of the population.

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) these communities are spread across the world from the arctic to the South Pacific, numbering approximately 300 million people. Most of these communities have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the majority of the population where they live.

The Council of Europe defines national minorities as a group of persons in a state who a) reside on the territory of that state and are citizens thereof; b) maintain longstanding, firm and lasting ties with that state; c) Display distinctive ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics; d) are sufficiently representative, although smaller in number than the rest of the population of that state or of a region of the state; (e) are motivated by a concern to preserve together that which constitutes their common identity, including their culture, their tradition, their religion or their language.

Minorities and violence

Minority groups are present in almost all countries around the world. When a minority is marginalized by the dominant population it frequently leads to conflict and destabilization. Ethnicity plays a principal role in the majority of the world's conflicts.

According to organizations such as Minority Rights Group International (MRG), minorities have been excluded and repressed in almost all countries and in many cases even killed by their governments. This problem is not new. During every period of human history, the cultures and livelihoods of minorities have faced the threat of being harmed or eradicated whenever dominant neighbouring peoples have expanded their territories; either because they felt threatened themselves by the expansion of minorities or merely to appropriate new lands by force.

Despite the recent development of minority rights in the human rights field, through conventions, treaties and the spread of democracy, the problem of eradication and discrimination of minorities continues today. Non-dominant ethnic, religious and linguistic communities are often among the poorest and most marginalized groups in society irrespective of their number, often relegated to the status of second-class citizens.

Many minorities around the world, especially when it comes to indigenous people, face the threat of being driven from their land and thus losing their source of livelihood, heritage and often their identity as a people. Sometimes property is confiscated without any form of compensation. In these situations, violence is often involved. Displacement due to civil and inter-state conflicts is not uncommon and many end up living as refugees or displaced persons for decades.

When governments fail to protect minorities from the prejudices of other groups in society, and when violence is introduced, the conflict becomes a threat to the entire society with a high risk of escalation. Due to the proliferation and wide availability of small arms, almost any person or ethnic group can create and foment violence to further their cause.

Around the world, millions of people have been killed as a result of armed conflict, genocide and civil war. Minorities continue to be the most vulnerable groups and sometimes the main targets in these situations

Objectives

The Board of the Parliamentary Forum of Small Arms and Light Weapons, meeting in Berlin, Germany on February 15, 2009;

Underscores the need to promote a political culture which views the modern state as a provider of democratic and human rights, including the rights of minorities, for all peoples within its borders, rather than an expression of one or more national identities;

Welcomes the recent development of international instruments to enhance the rights of minorities, in particular the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples;

Acknowledges that legal efforts and affirmative actions to protect the rights of minorities are needed in several fields; anti-discrimination, education, land rights, linguistic rights, participation, religion, the right to development and self-determination;

Recognizes that minorities are constantly exposed to violence involving SALW, in some cases as victims and in others as perpetrators, and that many conflicts involving minorities have caused violence, death as well as both internal and external displacement as a result of the use of small arms;

Urges the protection of national minorities' rights and respect for their lives and customs as an integral part of the international protection for human rights;

Recommends every parliament to legally recognize their different national minorities and to protect the rights of these through national legislation;

Mandates the Secretariat to monitor the development of the issue of minorities and SALW and take action in line with the adopted policy;