

Australia

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Objectives

The complex and multifaceted nature of the small arms issue, which involves security, arms control, law enforcement, human rights and development concerns, does not lend itself to a single, all-encompassing solution.

It has been suggested that the proposed conference should be a political event, with the primary purpose of producing a political declaration. Although Australia recognizes the importance of mobilizing international political will behind efforts to curb the proliferation and misuse of small arms, this should not be the overriding intent of the conference.

We believe that the primary focus of the conference should be on formulating practical suggestions to reduce destabilizing accumulations of and the proliferation of small arms. This would have the most significant impact on limiting the debilitating humanitarian and socio-economic consequences of the illicit small arms trade. In this context, the many national and regional activities currently under way could serve as building blocks for a broader international effort. An effective, plausible response to the small arms problem will require complementary efforts at the national, regional and international levels.

Making the conference primarily a political event could raise unrealistic expectations as to what can be achieved in the short term, and distract from practical measures which could have a positive impact in the short term.

In the event that the protocol to the United Nations convention against transnational organized crime, on trafficking in firearms, has not been concluded by the time of the small arms conference, Australia would hope that the latter conference would create the necessary political impetus to conclude these negotiations quickly.

There have also been suggestions that the conference might promote the negotiation of an international convention on small arms - possibly a convention on the marking of small arms. While this is a desirable goal which would likely prove useful in the future in tracing the origins and flow of small arms traffic, we are not convinced of its utility, as a focus for the forthcoming conference, in addressing the more immediate problems posed by excessive accumulations of small arms already stockpiled or in circulation. Australia would prefer that international efforts continue to concentrate on alleviating the effects of small arms misuse and proliferation, which are felt most often in the world's poorest countries.

Before we reach the stage of a broader international convention, we need to be in a position to gauge better the effectiveness of current activities at a regional level. The precise elements of any future international convention on small arms would also need to be decided, including the need for transparent, credible verification and compliance provisions.

The objectives of the conference should be sharply focused to avoid duplicating the work already under way on small arms in a number of regional and international forums. These forums include the European Union, the Organization of American States, the Organization for

African Union, the Regional Forum of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the South Pacific Forum.

Scope

In keeping with the intentions of General Assembly resolution 53/77 E, Australia believes the international conference should concentrate on the illicit side of the arms trade, where there appears to be more realistic opportunities for gaining early consensus and progress.

While we acknowledge that the line between licit and illicit trade is often indistinct, explicitly extending the conference to include licit trade could broaden the conference's scope to unmanageable levels, and decrease the likelihood of producing a viable, implementable outcome.

It will be important for the preparatory committee for the conference to:

- (a) Identify clear objectives for the conference;
- (b) Ensure that the conference does not duplicate work conducted elsewhere;
- (c) Ensure that the conference builds upon and adds value to the present strands of international debate and action on small arms.

Agenda

Based on the foregoing, Australia's preliminary view is that the following items could be included in the conference's agenda:

(a) National measures and export controls: their effectiveness in reducing illicit small arms traffic, and possible mechanisms for the sharing of expertise;

(b) National and regional activities as building blocks to a broader international response.

Dates

Given the busy forthcoming international arms control and disarmament agenda, it will be difficult to consider convening the conference before 2001. Holding the conference in 2001 would also allow more time for preparation and refining of objectives. While Australia is flexible on the matter of timing, we would suggest that the meeting be held some time in the latter half of 2001.

Venue

In determining a venue for the conference, we should keep in mind that the problems posed by small arms are felt more profoundly in developing countries. While we have no firm views on the matter, the conference's venue should promote an inclusive approach to the issue and allow for the greatest possible participation by States which are most directly affected by the small arms problem.

Preparatory work

The preparatory process for the international conference should be open-ended, inclusive and consultative. The pervasive nature of the

small arms problem, affecting many regions of the world, means that many States will have a close interest in preparations for the conference, and in particular in the development of its focus, scope and objectives.