

# EDITORIAL

## REPORTING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

---

In July 2003 the members of the United Nations will meet in New York for the first Biennial Meeting of States on the implementation of the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects. The purpose of this week-long meeting will be to report on progress made in implementing Programme of Action nationally and sub-regionally.

Small arms and light weapons have been termed by some 'the new weapons of mass destruction'. The Small Arms Survey, based on several years of research, has estimated that there are more than 600 million small arms in the world—enough for one in every 10 people in the world. States cannot ignore the potential for their misuse.

At international, regional and national levels countries have been formulating responses to the problems posed by small arms. These have taken different forms and have been implemented with varying levels of enthusiasm. In July 2001, the United Nations held its first conference on small arms. The resulting Programme of Action, a political declaration endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in October 2001, has become the basis by which many countries, in Africa and around the world, assess the progress they have made in controlling small arms.

One of the important elements of this Programme of Action is that it recognises that controlling the proliferation, availability and misuse of small arms requires different approaches at different levels. So, for example,

while political decisions may be required to change government policy on the destruction of state-owned weapons, technical and operational expertise is required to co-ordinate the destruction of those weapons.

### Where to start?

Where to start implementing these control measures is a matter that countries across the continent must resolve. The preamble to the Programme of Action notes that the illicit trade in small arms as sustains conflict, exacerbates violence, contributes to the displacement of civilians, undermines respect for international humanitarian law, impedes humanitarian assistance and its linkages to terrorism, organised crime, drug trafficking. The list seems endless.

Regions within sub-Saharan Africa also have their own, sub-regional agreements, which can provide complementary (or sometimes conflicting) starting points. In Southern Africa, the Protocol on the Control of Firearms, Ammunition and Other Related Material, signed in August 2000, requires only two more ratifications to enter into force. This looks as if it will be the first legal instrument on small arms to enter into force for Africa. Another protocol, the United Nations Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, which supplements the UN Convention on Transnational Organised Crime—the Palermo Convention—has been signed by a dismal nine countries in Africa and

only 52 globally. More positively, two of the three countries that have ratified the UN Protocol are in Africa: Mali and Burkina Faso (the third is Bulgaria). However unlike its parent convention, which has been the focus of a series of implementation measures around the world, the UN Firearms Protocol has been left in the wilds, while the focus has been on the Programme of Action.

Implementation of the SADC Protocol has focused on building technical knowledge within the region needed to implement key provisions, including weapons collection and destruction; marking and tracing; and the import and export controls.

In Eastern and Central Africa 10 countries signed the Nairobi Declaration on the Problem of the Proliferation of Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa in March 2000. While the Declaration has an associated Implementation Plan that covers a list of priority areas, the push in the region so far has been to build the institutions (so-called National Focal Points) that will co-ordinate interactions between countries.

In West Africa, the Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Small Arms and Light Weapons was agreed in 1999 and renewed in 2002. The focus for implementation in that region has been a mix of training, capacity-building and encouraging the establishment of national commissions, with varying degrees of success.

Although implementation of specifically-identified small arms control measures has only just begun, some of those identified in the UN Programme of Action build on what is already occurring. For example, combating the use of firearms in crime and violence is already a function of many police agencies (though their success is hard to quantify), while disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes, in their current format, have already been implemented in UN missions in Africa since ONUMOZ in Mozambique in 1992.

Faced with such ambitious goals, deciding where to start can be daunting. However, by recognising that much of the work already being undertaken also helps achieve the UN goals, it's clear that the work has already begun.