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UN Conference on Small Arms on the brink of failure

Since the beginning of the conference on 9 July, an estimated 25,000 people worldwide will have been killed by small arms. But as negotiations enter their final hours there is no prospect of agreement on concrete steps to stop the slaughter.

NEW YORK, July 20 – Oxfam International and Amnesty International fear that the first ever United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons will end as a major failure. "As talking goes on beyond the wire, the chance of a firm timetable for concrete action -- not just pious words -- seems negligible," the organizations said.

"The world's governments are throwing away this historic opportunity to make a difference," said Ed Cairns, Oxfam's representative at the conference. "Those suffering directly and indirectly from small arms violence desperately need these delegates to come together and succeed -- but they are on the brink of failure."

"The tragedy is that governments are moving to tackle small arms with a shameful sloth that will leave hundreds of thousands dead each year until real preventive action is taken."

Amnesty International and Oxfam International called for a plan of action that would bring about real improvements in war-torn countries and those suffering repression -- a plan that would contain several strong elements, including a legally binding international convention to control arms exports, and a convention to regulate the shady world of arms brokers and traffickers. But the UN delegates have not yet even agreed to the whole of the weaker draft Program of Action proposed by

the chair of the conference. This has focussed on technocratic measures such as the marking and tracing of weapons -- provisions which, by themselves, can have little effect.

Oxfam and Amnesty International argued that, according to existing international law, no government should authorize any transfer of small arms or light weapons to a state or non-state entity as long as there is a clear risk that these arms will be used by the likely recipient to commit gross human rights abuses, war crimes or crimes against humanity.

“It is no good just tracing weapons, and then destroying surpluses, after the catastrophe has happened,” said Isaac Lappia, Director of Amnesty International in Sierra Leone. “The world does not want your tears; people suffering all over the world just want governments to face up to their existing responsibilities.”

An estimated 500,000 people are killed on average each year with small arms, not to mention the people left injured and destitute. And the number of factories making such arms in countries which lack basic controls is increasing.

“We are all very angry at the conference’s failure, but are determined to step up our campaigning to control small arms and cut the killing”, said Brian Wood of Amnesty International. “We applaud those governments that have tried in vain to get firm results from this conference. The challenge for them now is to press for action -- whether through the UN or not.”

At the conference, Canada, Norway and the countries of the European Union unsuccessfully pressed for clear agreement that small arms should not be exported where there is a real risk that they will be

used to violate human rights, fuel foreign aggression, or where excessive arms purchases divert resources needed to combat poverty. The USA, China, many ASEAN countries, the Arab Group and South Africa were amongst those governments that blocked moves to secure such commitments.

Amnesty International and Oxfam are working with others in the newly-formed Humanitarian Coalition on Small Arms to achieve real controls on small arms after the failure of the UN conference. Other members include Human Rights Watch, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and the Arias Foundation.

Oxfam and Amnesty International are also members of the International Action Network on Small Arms.

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