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US joins Arms Trade Treaty talks, but at high price

- NGOs welcome US support but warn that proposal to give every Member State veto power would weaken not strengthen future Treaty

New York: Today's announcement by the US government at the United Nations of its support for beginning negotiations on the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) was welcomed by Oxfam International and Amnesty International. But the two international organisations also warned that Washington's support comes at a very high price.

The shift in position by the world's biggest arms exporter is a major breakthrough in launching formal negotiations at the United Nations in order to prevent irresponsible arms transfers. It shows that the Obama administration is serious about reducing the negative effects caused by the uncontrolled trade in conventional weapons. The US government, under the Bush Administration, is the only government to vote against the UN process toward an ATT at the General Assembly in the past.

Today, as part of its support, the US government has given the condition that future negotiations must include a veto clause, by stipulating that decisions at the final conference must be taken by consensus.

This, Oxfam and Amnesty International say, could fatally weaken a final deal.

"The world has waited a long time for the USA to come on board to support global arms trade negotiations. However, Governments must resist US demands to give any single state the power to veto the treaty as this could hold the process hostage during the course of negotiations. We call on all governments to reject such a veto clause." said Oxfam International's policy adviser Debbie Hillier.

Governments are meeting this month in New York in a make-or-break meeting to kick start formal negotiations for a global ATT.

The two international organisations say that new global standards on arms transfers must be agreed in order to prohibit the international transfer of arms likely to be used to commit serious violations of international humanitarian or human rights law or to undermine sustainable development.

"At long last the US government says that it wants a strong and robust Arms Trade Treaty with the highest possible standards", said Brian Wood of Amnesty International. "But by giving every single government the right to scupper the UN Conference in 2012, the US position could hugely weaken or delay agreement to tackle irresponsible arms transfers that shatter countless lives worldwide."

Notes:

The UN began work on an Arms Trade Treaty to control the conventional trade in arms following a landslide vote in 2006. The USA was then the only state to vote against the Resolution which started this work. 153 states voted in favour.

Lead governments on the ATT are UK, Argentina, Australia, Costa Rica, Japan, Kenya and Finland.

There is currently no global regulation on the conventional arms trade. Armed violence claims around 2000 deaths per day.

The Arms Trade Treaty would require states to authorize any international arms transfer that originated, or passed through their territory. It would not impinge on states legitimate right to purchase and acquire weapons for self defence. It would also not affect civilian ownership, as it would regulate international arms transfers only.