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World's Biggest Arms Traders Promise Global Arms Treaty

Today at the United Nations years of discussions and debates, the vast majority of governments – 153 in total - agreed a timetable to establish a "strong and robust" Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) with the "highest common standards" to control international transfers of conventional arms. There is currently no global Treaty on the conventional arms trade.

Most of the world's biggest arms traders – including the USA, UK, France and Germany - will now all back the UN process. Nineteen states abstained but are all expected to take part in the process. Zimbabwe was the only State to vote against.

During the debates on the resolution, many countries spoke out and underlined the need for the treaty to be based on international law, including international human rights and humanitarian law.

The Control Arms campaign – a coalition of hundreds of non-governmental organizations in over 100 countries that has promoted the ATT - welcomed the historic breakthrough at the UN today and called on all States to negotiate a truly effective Treaty. They warned that governments must keep up the momentum to ensure the final Treaty has firm international standards for the global arms trade. Campaigners expressed reservations about the procedure planned for the UN Conference that could give every State the right of veto over final decisions at the UN Conference. They warned a small number of sceptical States must not be allowed to hijack the ATT process when it is clear the world wants a strong treaty.

“All countries participate in the conventional arms trade and share responsibility for the ‘collateral damage’ it produces – widespread death, injuries and human rights abuses,” said Rebecca Peters, director of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA). “Now finally governments have agreed to negotiate legally binding global controls on this deadly trade.”

The agreement in the UN today means that the eventual ATT will be negotiated in a series of UN meetings concluding at a UN Conference in 2012.

“The Arms Trade Treaty needs a ‘golden rule’ requiring governments to stop any proposed arms transfer that poses a substantial risk of being used for serious violations of human rights or war crimes,” said Brian Wood, Amnesty International's head of arms control, “such a golden rule could save hundreds of thousands of lives and protect the livelihoods of many millions.”

The resolution on the ATT also highlights the issue of international arms transfers contributing to armed conflict, displacement of people, organised crime and terrorism, thereby undermining peace, safety, security and sustainable development.

"For too long, governments have let the flow of weapons get out of control causing pain, suffering and death in some of the world's poorest regions. With hundreds of thousands of people dying a year from armed violence, weapons that fall into the hands of criminals and rights abusers destroy communities and livelihoods." said Anna Macdonald of Oxfam International. "Governments must ensure that negotiations live up to the promise of setting the highest possible standards - this is a life and death situation for thousands of poor people worldwide."

* The States that abstained were: Bahrain, Belarus, China, Cuba, Egypt, India, Iran, Kuwait, Libya, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, UAE, Venezuela and Yemen.

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