

Update #1: United Nations 2021 First Committee Small Arms and Light Weapons

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Despite the fact that small arms and light weapons (SALW) continue to fuel conflict, terrorism, crime, gender-based violence, and other national and international security problems, most member states kept their remarks on these weapons relatively brief during the first week of the general debate of the First Committee. Bangladesh and Nepal noted that the illicit transfer, accumulation, and misuse of SALW remains a serious threat to security and stability and a cause of conflict and transnational crime. Despite these general remarks, Mexico assured that specific issues regarding SALW, such as diversion, will be discussed in more depth during the thematic debates, which begins on 13 October.

States largely lauded the successful adoption of the outcome document of the Seventh Biennial Meeting of States (BMS7) on the UN Programme of Action on the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons (UNPoA) held in July 2021, noting that this year marks the 20th anniversary of the UNPoA. Chile, Yemen, Trinidad, Lebanon, Ecuador, Kenya, and Burkina Faso were among states that welcomed the progress made during BMS7. Some states also noted the need to maintain the momentum to BMS8 (scheduled for 2022) and beyond. Other states also affirmed the continued importance of the UNPoA and its essential role in reducing armed violence, while noting regional initiatives and the need for “effective multilateralism” and international cooperation, such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) did. States such as Sweden, Ghana, Costa Rica, and Ecuador raised the gendered dimension of the armed violence and the illicit use of SALW. The successful conclusion of the Group of Governmental Experts on Ammunition was commended by Germany and Brazil.

Costa Rica noted in its statement that civil society is a vital partner and keeping them out of the UN silences the voices that member states serve. Civil society again does not have access to the UN premises due to COVID-19 mitigation measures and again there will not be meaningful civil society participation and engagement with UN member states during this First Committee session. Civil society participation was limited to the session dedicated to statements by civil society held on Friday morning. This session is the only official time for civil society organisations to join the meeting.

Despite the short amount of time allocated to civil society in the First Committee’s programme of work—one hour—and the time limit imposed on the delivery of their statements (three minutes per organisation), a few internet connection and sound issues, civil society representatives made statements on a range of thematic issues, including SALW. The [IANSA statement](#), delivered by Mayda de Leon from Guatemala, reminded the assembly of the devastating cost of armed violence on civilians: death, injuries, disabilities, psychological trauma, gender-based violence and more. Regardless of topic, most of the civil society statements called for accountability, recognition and change. Moreover, the diverse representation was a testament to ensuring that a diverse range of voices: from youth and survivors, to underrepresented groups, be represented in processes on disarmament such as the First Committee.

Ecuador, Mexico, Colombia, and Djibouti responded to the statements by civil society by recognising the important contribution and expertise of civil society noting that it enriches the work of this committee. The continued limited participation of civil society in UN meetings highlights the need to establish more effective participation mechanisms especially as COVID-19 continues to have global impacts.

We look forward to the introduction of the annual resolutions on SALW by South Africa, Colombia, and Japan, and the beginning of thematic debates next week. In the words of the UN Secretary General, quoted by the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu during [her intervention](#) on Friday, “we are at an inflection point in history, to choose from the path towards breakdown or breakthrough”. In the next weeks, we will see if states are willing to choose a path that prioritises human lives and addresses the range of negative impacts from illicit SALW.