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“Real and present danger”

Control Arms Interview with Permanent Representative of Guyana to the UN

Guyana became the second country in the world to ratify the United Nations Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) on 5 July. In an interview with Control Arms staff and members, Ambassador George W. Talbot, Permanent Representative of Guyana to the United Nations, explains how the ATT fills an important gap in the existing arms control architecture while also reinforcing the importance of strong implementation.

Allison Pytlak (Control Arms): Guyana ratified the treaty incredibly quickly. Is this representative a high level of public support for the Treaty in your country?

Ambassador George W. Talbot (Mission of Guyana to UN): I think it's reflective of the concern at the national level for the risk and the dangers that are posed by these weapons. Our experience recently is that crime has increasingly involved the use of firearms. Before there were other kinds of implements, but now firearms are becoming increasingly prevalent. Our political leaders, both government and opposition, were responding to those wider societal concerns and that has led them to unanimous adoption of the motion for ratification.

Lorey Campese (Oxfam): Guyana is neither a major importer nor exporter of conventional arms. With that in mind, what does the ratification of the Arms Trade Treaty, and the Treaty as a whole, mean for Guyana and the broader region?

Ambassador Talbot: The real and present danger that these weapons pose and the major challenge of course is the diversion of these weapons for illicit uses. Guyana and the Caribbean sit on the passageway of major movements of drugs, weapons, and crime associated with that. We have wide open borders and it is very difficult to manage those kinds of influences. To confront these challenges at the international level, we have managed to agree on an instrument, the first of its kind, to begin to regulate the flow of those arms.

This is very significant in trying to fill a major gap in the international architecture. Of course, the adoption of the Treaty is just the beginning. A lot will depend on the implementation and honoring the ATT's provisions. There's a long road ahead. It certainly provides an opportunity to mobilize further support on a legally binding basis to help address some of these challenges that Guyana and the region face.

Allison: Among the new provisions of the Treaty, is there one that you feel especially proud of or are very happy to have seen included.

Ambassador Talbot: I understand from our experts that the provisions on small arms and light weapons are especially significant, because those are the weapons that have the most meaning for us. As you have observed, we are not major importers nor exporters and we do not have huge military infrastructures so without those weapons in the Treaty, it would not have as much meaning for us.

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Those inclusions as well as those related to ammunition, parts, and components are very relevant in the scope of the Treaty. There may be some differential treatment to some of these elements, but I think that they are all subject to important provisions in the Treaty and this gives us some assurance that this is a good beginning. There are also provisions on amendments and enhancing provisions in the future, however difficult that may be.

There are different schools of thought as to whether a treaty slides downwards or upwards in terms of its impact over time, but a lot of experience suggests that while there may be tentative beginnings, over time the comfort level may increase so we are hopeful.

Lorey: Many countries are indicating that they are prepared to implement and interpret the Arms Trade Treaty at a very high standard, particularly the Treaty's scope. Do you have any comments on Guyana's interpretation of the Treaty?

Ambassador Talbot: We have not made a specific statement on that dimension, but if I am to judge by the debate in our parliament, there is a generally shared sense of the need for strong provisions nationally in our legislation to fully and effectively implement the ATT. I am optimistic that we will follow through on the undertakings given by the members of our parliament. I feel reasonably confident that Guyana will take a strong view on the implementation of the scope of interpretation of the Treaty. The Government has shown the political will.