

## Why this arms trade treaty is essential

William Hague, Laurent Fabius, Guido Westerwelle and Ewa Björling, Monday 2 July 2012

*The UN conference on the arms trade aims to create a treaty that will reduce the killing and maiming of people around the world*



Philippine soldiers recover illegal weapons from a private army.  
Photograph: Erik De Castro/Reuters

Today the international community is gathering at the United Nations in New York to negotiate the first truly comprehensive treaty governing the trade of conventional arms throughout the world.

There is a clear case for governments to act now. Every year, millions of people around the world suffer from the direct and indirect effects of the poorly regulated arms trade and the illicit trafficking of arms. Hundreds of thousands of people are killed or injured. Many are raped or forced to abandon their homes. Others live their lives under a constant threat of violence. Armed violence diverts resources away from schools, healthcare systems and infrastructure. It undermines sustainable development and ruins many chances for the sort of stable life that we take for granted. Coupled with a growth in the illicit trafficking of arms, we are facing a growing threat to humanity.

Over the last decade, governments have become increasingly aware of this threat and have resolved to tackle it. At the same time, civil society, democratically elected representatives and global public opinion have all demanded action. In 2006, the international community agreed to focus its will through a UN process that is now entering its final stage.

We have studied and discussed the issue in all its aspects. The overwhelming majority of UN member states have shown a true desire to address the problems posed by unregulated trade in conventional arms. This month, we are faced with the responsibility of fulfilling this commitment by crafting and agreeing a robust, effective and legally binding arms trade treaty. Now is the time for us to deliver.

As some of the largest exporters in Europe, thus bearing a special responsibility in this matter, we have worked together from the start. The approach we are taking is grounded in the strong humanitarian principles that we share. Underpinning these values is our firm belief that there is a legitimate international trade in arms, which should be acknowledged and respected in these negotiations. We believe that states have a right to acquire the means to protect their citizens.

However, we also believe that states have a responsibility to ensure that arms are not used in a way that is inconsistent with the humanitarian aims of the treaty, or violates international law.

While many states already operate robust export control systems, the lack of common international standards allows inconsistencies that those who would do harm can exploit. The arms trade treaty should be legally binding, but nationally enforced. This will ensure the global consistency required to make the treaty effective, while maintaining state signatories' right to decide on arms transfers. We believe that an arms trade treaty should cover all types of conventional weapons, notably including small arms and light weapons, all types of munitions, and related technologies. It is also of great importance that the treaty includes strong provisions on human rights, international humanitarian law and sustainable development.

We also want to see a treaty that seeks to prevent the diversion of arms from the legal market to illicit trafficking networks and curbs the impact of corruption in the arms trade. A strong and comprehensive framework of common international standards is an essential step in reaching this goal.

We must also consider the implementation of the treaty. It should include measures to make systems transparent and legally enforceable, and be grounded in the realities of the 21st-century defence industry.

This is a challenging endeavour and four weeks is a very short time to negotiate. A lot of work remains to bring all major players in the international arms trade on board. We will need the broadest possible coalition of forces. We are calling upon our fellow governments, civil society, the defence industry and individual citizens to lend us their support in what we hope will be a final decisive effort.

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