

Seminar on Small Arms Proliferation in Ghana

Philip Dufty
Intern, CHRI

On 5th July, CHRI held a seminar in the British Council, Accra, Ghana, on the proliferation of small arms and light weapons¹. It was organised in cooperation with the Foundation for Security and Development in Africa (FOSDA), with whom we had collaborated on producing a report on the presence and manufacture of small arms in Ghana².

For CHRI, the event had added significance as it was the first event organised by our new Ghana office and its coordinator, Bernice Baiden. The Minister of the Interior, the Attorney-General, as well as representatives of the police, military, customs and various NGOs, contributed to the seminar. The large media presence, including the three principal television stations, gave good coverage to the event.

In its 1999 report on small arms transfers to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) CHRI had pointed out the challenge the unchecked proliferation of small arms poses to human rights. *Over a Barrel: Light Weapons and Human Rights in the Commonwealth* stressed that “the right to peace, in an era of conflict, has become increasingly fundamental to universally held notions of human rights, and must remain an area of central concern for citizens, states and human rights organisations.”

The Durban CHOGM Communiqué states that “the challenge posed by the proliferation of small arms involved security, humanitarian and development dimensions.”³ It urged member countries to support and encourage the initiative of the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, planned for 2001. The present seminar was designed to feed into the Ghanaian government delegation’s position at the conference.

FOSDA and CHRI presented a working paper which examined the nature and extent of small arms in Ghana, the various sources of illicit manufacture and identified some of the recognised import routes. The paper concluded that illicit domestic production is carried out by small-scale artisans who have established thriving illicit trade networks. Our joint proposal was, that if the trade thrives despite prohibition, it is important to introduce new legislation to bring these manufacturers out into the open. This would enable government to better trace and regulate the production, sale and use of small arms, and establish tracing mechanisms. This, we stress, must be done in conjunction with greater regional-level control of arms flows, which should begin with the extension, in October 2001, of the ECOWAS Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation, & Manufacture of Light Weapons.

The Minister of the Interior, Mr Yakubu, noted the importance to democracy of peace and stability. He expressed concern at Ghana’s position as a haven for the manufacture and trade

in weapons and accepted that the relatively lax laws are a contributory factor to the problem and pledged to tighten, amend or repeal laws that regulate these matters. He further explained that security agencies were looking at ways to simultaneously improve the quality of the locally manufactured arms and register them for monitoring purposes.

The Attorney-General, Mr Addo, affirmed the present governments political will to tackle the problem and commended CHRI and FOSDA for their efforts to inform the public and government on the dangers of small arms. He deplored the fact that previous government's policies had served to "democratize violence."

The speakers received constructive and pertinent criticism in an open forum, which demonstrated the high levels of concern in the Ghanaian population regarding this issue. CHRI and FOSDA urged everybody to raise their voices against the scourge of small arms which is currently bringing insecurity to the lives of Ghana's people. Government representatives were specifically requested to use the upcoming UN Conference to prepare the ground for the extension of the ECOWAS⁴ Moratorium and to discuss the regulation of domestic production. Government was further urged to engage seriously in dialogue and sustained cooperation with civil society.

The International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) produced daily reports on the progress of the UN conference, which began just four days after the seminar. On day five of the conference, the Ghanaian delegation made its submission. It stated that it had carried out an arms destruction ceremony on the 9th July and went on to emphasise the important role that NGOs can play in information exchange, disarmament and more.

Small Arms in Ghana

Manufacture of small arms in Ghana is carried out in guilds or as a 'family trade' where knowledge and skills are passed on from father to son or to close associates. The dreaded AK 47 rifle is only imported by the state for security forces, however the daily reportage of armed robberies mentions the use of these rifles. This could be through leaks from State armouries and through systematically giving licences to favoured political allies by the government in power. Small arms manufacture by traditional gunsmiths remains lucrative for a variety of reasons, ethnic conflicts, disputes over leadership, self-protection and robberies in Ghana. Since the December, 2000 elections, there has been an unprecedented increase in armed robberies in the country. Types of guns ranging from single and double barrelled, short action pump, traditional dane guns and pistols with fineness akin to those from developed countries can be bought for prices ranging from as low as US\$ 4.5 to US\$ 93.