

Seminar held on 5th May 1999

## **The Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers: West Africa and Beyond**

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**Speaker : Ole-Petter Sunde**

The Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers (NISAT) was established on 17 December 1997 by The Norwegian Red Cross, Norwegian Church Aid, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, and the International Peace Research Institute. Together, these four organizations comprise NISAT. NISAT is both morally and financially supported (approximately 75 – 80 per cent of its budget) by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ole-Petter Sunde, who is the director of NISAT and with the Norwegian Red Cross, began his presentation by describing the organization of NISAT and then discussing its initiatives in the area of small arms and light weapons.

Given the extensive reach of the organizations that compose it, NISAT represents one of the world's largest networks of NGOs. For the Norwegian Red Cross, membership and participation in the NISAT network is important due to its exposure to the tragic consequences of small arms proliferation. The humanitarian relief community has a very direct self-interest in combating this problem. Not only does armed conflict create the crises that relief workers are called in to alleviate; the use of small arms also hampers their ability to carry out their work. In an informal survey, ICRC field workers with significant experience in the field reported that their operations were routinely interrupted by armed violence. In the Norwegian Red Cross' experience, aid workers are increasingly being directly threatened, intimidated, kidnapped or, in an increasing number of cases, killed. To raise awareness of

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these dangers, the Norwegian Red Cross and its partner organizations launched NISAT on 17 December 1997 on the anniversary of the murder in Chechnya of six Red Cross relief workers, who had been killed with automatic weapons one year previously. Two of these relief workers were colleagues from the Norwegian Red Cross.

The scope of the humanitarian consequences engendered by small arms proliferation has been well researched by the ICRC. Their researchers estimate that in general, more than 50 percent of war casualties—one out of every two—are civilians. This rather *conservative* estimate is derived from a case study from Bosnia. In some conflicts, of course, the civilian mortality rate is much higher.

## **West Africa**

One of NISAT's goals has been to encourage international support for West African states in halting further small arms production and purchases. In this context, the West African moratorium has been NISAT's main focus. NISAT, with its partners, had, at the time of its launching, a good knowledge of the moratorium initiative by the President of Mali through their colleagues at Norwegian Church Aid and the International Institute of International Affairs (Oslo). Due to their involvement in the issue for some years, it was quite natural for NISAT to choose it as their main interest and focus. It was practical way of approaching the problem of proliferation, and they invited the 16 ECOWAS states together with the 33 Wassenaar countries to a conference in Oslo in April 1998. This was to discuss how the process of the moratorium could be maintained and sped up. Following the meeting in Oslo, close contacts were kept with the ECOWAS states. NISAT organized, together with civil society groups and NGOs, three consultations in West Africa in 1998. NISAT was also proud to host a meeting of West African and other governments in April 1998, where President Alpha Omar Konaré of Mali challenged governments in the region to a three year moratorium on small arms imports, exports

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and production. The sixteen heads of states in the West African region agreed to such a moratorium on 31 October 1998. The moratorium is currently being implemented. Until now there have been many diplomatic consultations on getting all 16 states to sign.

NISAT is now working to gain support for a Program for Cooperation and Assistance for Security and Development in the region (PCASED), by encouraging local civil society engagement in the moratorium and related measures, and by hosting a conference of donor governments to raise awareness about the financial resources needed to make this West African experiment succeed. This conference was held in Geneva on 4 May 1999 with the participation of about 40 countries (among them representatives from about 25 arms producing/exporting countries).

### **The NISAT Database on Small Arms and Light Weapons**

Another focus of NISAT has been on understanding where small arms and light weapons are coming from, and on developing standards to limit the global surplus production and irresponsible export of guns, ammunition and grenades. To date there exists very little hard data on the principal sources of small arms supply and trafficking. For example, it is currently impossible to know which government is the largest supplier of assault rifles and grenades.

To help fill this gap and to better inform the work of governments and activists, NISAT is developing a comprehensive, internet-based database of world-wide military small arms production and transfers. Although still in a very early stage of development, the database is up and running (at [www.nisat.org](http://www.nisat.org)). This web site links up to the database, where, upon clicking on a country you can obtain information concerning: small arms industry and products; laws and policies relating to arms exports; authorized small arms exports; authorized small arms imports; illegal arms trafficking; and much more information.

In 1999 priority will be given to gathering, translating, and

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organizing government export data for those states that currently make such information public. In addition, NISAT's intention is to further develop and extend this information base into the foreseeable future, or for as long as small arms control measures are required. In Sunde's opinion, the database will become more valuable over time as more governments are persuaded to provide information about their small arms production and trade.

### **Security Sector Reform in Malawi**

In February 1999 NISAT started a pilot project in Malawi to promote security sector reform and help curb the flow of small arms from Mozambique and other neighbor countries. The purpose of the project is to mobilize civil society groups to work in cooperation with the police and customs to monitor and prevent cross-border trafficking in small arms. Stakeholders in Malawi will be government officials, police, community leaders and NGOs.

The situation in Malawi is quite different from other areas NISAT works in, for instance West Africa. Malawi is a peaceful country without military conflicts of any kind. This project has a character of prevention; Malawi is a country that *could* be dangerously affected by private persons' possession of small arms/light weapons if nothing is done to *stop* arms proliferation. At the same time it is of crucial importance to make the authorities more capable to carry out their professional duties which include, among other things, the securing of borders and the maintenance of security in general for the civil population. At present, it is evident that many Malawians from different areas and social backgrounds are worried about their personal safety because of incidents of violent crime often carried out by armed gangs operating in both urban and rural areas.

Police and government officials appear to agree that illegal possession of firearms (especially AK47s) in Malawi is a result of cross border trafficking, mainly from Mozambique, but also Zambia and South Africa. Some say that the problem escalated significantly some years ago when hundreds of thousands of

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Mozambican refugees sold or bartered AK47s to Malawians in order to have resources to resettle at home. It is assumed that many of these weapons are hidden in Malawi, and the authorities and police NISAT has met confirmed that cross border trafficking is still continuing

In Sunde's opinion there may be a need for some legal reform to tackle the proliferation of firearms, but this appears not to be the most urgent task. Although the Minister of Justice is concerned about the situation, he considers that it would be a great advantage if Malawi and the neighboring countries had the same legal framework; hence the need to harmonize the legal framework in the region.

### **International Arms Brokering Report**

In June 1999 NISAT will launch an international arms brokering report<sup>1</sup>. Many governments more or less committed to improving arms export controls still have loopholes in their laws and regulations, which allow brokers to continue supplying arms to illegitimate customers. NISAT wishes to research and publish a report with several case studies to show how arms brokers and their sub-contracting agents continually establish international networks, and how they use a range of methods to circumvent established laws. Consequently NISAT will recommend to governments the adoption of laws and regulations that have been shown to work effectively against such practices. The report will be presented at a press conference in Washington, London and Oslo in June this year.

NISAT is not simply a 'moratorium initiative'; while the moratorium is an important part of NISAT's work, it is not its only activity. When NISAT was founded in 1997 / 98, it had an advantage that some of its member organizations already had knowledge about the moratorium process that started up in Mali several years previous. This year focus has shifted to the southern part of Africa - Malawi. NISAT has also had contacts and discussions with authorities in Kenya, with Sunde meeting with the For-

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eign Minister last year. According to Sunde, there might be some interest from Kenya and other countries in the region to see if there are possibilities of eventually controlling the flow of small arms and light weapons in that region. If so, NISAT is willing to play a role, provided it is invited to do so. NISAT's other projects in 1999 have included the organization of numerous presentations with the UN and other countries in Europe, as well as academic seminars in Oslo and elsewhere. But the main activities are those described. Africa is not the only focus of NISAT; in 2000 it will also be involved on other projects in Asia or Latin America with NGOs that have requested their cooperation.

In Sunde's opinion, it is important for NISAT to focus on small arms transfers, which forms its core mandate. Over the course of the coming years, NISAT will continue to build and support collaborative networks of the many existing local, regional and international actors working to control or limit small arms transfers. In this context, NISAT will undertake research, studies and information gathering to identify and define the optimal goals and working methods. Furthermore, NISAT also intends to contribute through the organization of seminars, conferences and media events to mobilize further support and action; and through the provision of moral and financial support to local and regional arms transfer campaigns and moratoria.

### Questions and Answers

**Q.: What other parts of Africa are covered by NISAT's mandate?**

A.: In Kenya there is a strong interest in NISAT's initiatives. Kenya should be an area of focus because of its position towards and proximity to the conflicts in the Great Lakes region. While there is a clear interest in getting something done there, it is difficult to draw the contours of a future initiative. It is not clear whether this should take the form of a moratorium or a multilateral agreement. Nonetheless, these discussions stand as testimony to the

importance of the West African arms moratorium insofar as it is generating much discussion elsewhere.

**Q.:** How is the West African arms moratorium being translated into national laws? How can we measure the degree to which the moratorium's terms are complied with and enforced? With regard to manufacturing, how do you envisage curbing new production? You have mentioned data-collection activities, and the assessment of different methods (such as prohibitions) - what practical steps are foreseen to attenuate the flow of arms?

**A.:** It is crucial to broaden the knowledge of the moratorium within the countries party to it, both among the population and within the government. This is a vital first step among many before any practical results become visible. The United Nations PCASED initiative, directed by Mr. Ivor Fung, has tasks oriented in the directions you mentioned. The moratorium is simply a piece of paper with signatures; there is no law that compels adherence to it, but rather the existence of a common political will. Among many other functions, PCASED is supposed to raise awareness of the moratorium, and small arms/light weapons issues more generally, within the civilian population. Knowledge about the consequences of the uncontrolled proliferation of small arms should also be brought into the schools, for instance. There should be many ways of 'teaching' both the government and civilian population about the impact of small arms. With regard to production, Sunde stated that there is no production of small arms within the ECOWAS region. The moratorium stipulates that there should be no production, import and export of small arms over the next three years. At the end of this period the results of the moratorium will be assessed, the goal of which is to ascertain its practicality.

**Q.:** A point of information was raised. With regard to the issue of arms production in Western Africa, although there exists an arms producing company in Nigeria, it has not been in operation over the past three years. Regarding the importance of raising awareness of the moratorium, it was recounted that

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in Sierra Leone most people, including the police, have never heard of the moratorium. Because information on the moratorium is not getting out, knowledge dissemination to both the press and civil society is crucial.

**Q.:** The moratorium as a whole will collapse if production continues, and attention should be paid to what will happen after the three-year period. The focus of the question therefore, concerns the international and global implications of the moratorium. What are the global implications of the moratorium?

**A.:** NISAT utilizes the concept of the moratorium when discussing measures to combat small arms proliferation in other countries. The initiative and ideas in this respect must, however, come from the countries themselves. This is a question of political will and interest; no country can be forced to undertake particular measures. One of the problems attached to this is that it precludes the concept of a 'global' moratorium which, while useful, might ultimately not be practical in the short-term. Nonetheless there are ways to initiate thinking in this direction. NISAT believes it important to work with arms producers as well as exporters on a global level. Meetings of regional groupings, such as the Wassenaar arrangement, should be widened to include links with all other arms producing and exporting states in the world.

**Q.:** What were the conditions in which the moratorium was created? What were the mechanisms behind its creation, and the obstacles encountered during the process? How can the provisions of the moratorium be enforced and verified?

**A.:** NISAT entered the moratorium process in 1998. The idea of the moratorium was first articulated in 1994 by the President of Mali, who took it up with the United Nations Secretary-General. The UN sent a mission to Mali and organized a series of international meetings on the issue. NISAT took its first step within the moratorium process in April 1998, with the support and financial back-

ing of the Norwegian government. While they were initially skeptical about NISAT's chances of success, they were ready to take the risk. The critical factor that will determine the success of the moratorium is political will; if it succeeds it will provide important guidelines for other internal initiatives to combat arms proliferation. With regard to obstacles, the largest is undoubtedly the lack of knowledge in both government and civil society. The ECOWAS chair will pass to the President of Mali at the end of 1999, who will be in a good position to raise the issue of the moratorium. International society is interested in Mali due to its strategic position in the region and its history of conflict resolution. Another obstacle is the funding of PCASED.

**Q.:** What types of arms control or disarmament is NISAT's initiative specifically aimed at? Will NISAT be gathering and using hospital data to assess the situation of arms proliferation and assess/evaluate the success of the moratorium? How does the mandate of NISAT relate to the larger questions and issues of international humanitarian law?

A. : The destruction of arms (including surplus stocks) in West Africa forms part of the mandate of PCASED, which is the implementation mechanism of the moratorium. Destruction of arms is one of PCASED's nine major tasks, which include, among others things, the collection of arms. Buy-back schemes are not the main mechanism for collecting or destroying arms; they do not function well. Instead, other mechanisms are being sought or evaluated. Although the moratorium will only run for three years, the PCASED implementation mechanism has a mandate of five years ; this is due to the role it will play in evaluating the success (or failure) of the former. To this end, a database on small arms and light weapons is being established which will collect specific data on both arms and other issues related to the moratorium. With regard to international humanitarian law, NISAT does cooperate with the ICRC on this issue. Although international humanitarian law has not received much attention to-date, NISAT does intend to increase its focus within the next few years.

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**Q. : How is NISAT organized with respect to its four 'founding' organizations? How does it function?**

A. : The president of NISAT is Jan Egeland, who works part-time, while the director is Sunde. The four organizations that form NISAT—the Norwegian Red Cross, Norwegian Church Aid, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, and International Peace Research Institute—do not focus exclusively on small arms and light weapons, but have a broader focus on related issues. Thus, no organization expends all its effort on NISAT, but rather supports it in the course of their activities; the issues underlying NISAT's mandate are always taken up in the context of field missions, for instance. The 'core group' of NISAT meets five times a year, while active cooperation is maintained through projects on which NISAT and staff from the other organizations collaborate. NISAT is a 'loose' association that began as an initiative, but soon outgrew this status into something approaching an organization due to the high level of cooperation that was generated between the partner organizations. In Sunde's opinion, if such cooperation had not resulted, the structure would have been changed. NISAT is an open-ended project; no termination date is foreseen for any reason. The focus on small arms is constant; the Norwegian and Canadian governments work closely on this issue and provide great moral support to NISAT.

**Q. : If, for some reason, the moratorium is not extended beyond its three-year mandate, what measures will be taken to inculcate a tradition of response?**

A. : Sunde stated that he was not the appropriate person to answer the question. If the moratorium succeeds during its three-year life span, he sees no reason for it not being extended. If the moratorium fails, the mechanism will be re-arranged and re-constituted in different form. The international community has invested much in the process, and will definitely request a follow-up mechanism. According to his sources, Sunde believes that a large degree

of long-term support underlies the initiative, even if the moratorium itself fails. In addition, the United Nations Development Programme is playing a major role in the moratorium.

**Q. :** With regard to educating schoolchildren on the dangers posed by uncontrolled arm proliferation, it is important that such programs target producer countries in addition to the countries affected by such proliferation. Another important arena for reeducation is the reintegration of ex-combatants, even if one agrees that buy-back programs have at best limited utility. Regarding the NISAT database, it is a good project, but there is also a danger. The problem with providing a comprehensive list of rules, producers and sales is that individuals wishing to procure arms might find it a good tool. Finally, in the context of the moratorium, what measures are being discussed or evaluated in the context of regions that are beyond the control of the government?

**A. :** NISAT does not run training and education programs in schools or other fora, but does encourage civil society to raise awareness of proliferation issues and the consequences of gun use. Concerning the reintegration of ex-combatants, some practical projects have been undertaken, including, for instance one in the north of Mali. Both legal and illegal arms are a problem; in West Africa NISAT sees its focus also on limiting the legal transfers of arms. Finally, with regard to the question of 'inaccessible regions', Sunde affirmed that these exist and pose the greatest challenge to the success of the moratorium within three years. The goals of the moratorium will only be achieved slowly, over time. PCASED will be extremely instrumental in this regard, raising awareness of the moratorium among civil society even in these inaccessible regions. This will however take much time; three years might be insufficient time.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Brian Wood and Johan Peleman (1999) *The Arms Fixers: Controlling the Brokers and Shipping Agents*. A Joint Report by BASIC, NISAT, and PRIO. International Peace Research Institute, Oslo.