

Faith groups work with UN to limit arms trade: U.S. not present for vote on agreement

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Religious and peace groups have offered qualified praise for a recent nonbinding United Nations agreement on small arms that they say takes a step in efforts to curb the trade in illicit weapons.

A weeklong conference at the UN in New York ended July 18 with 134 nations agreeing to recommendations that would stipulate the marking of small arms at the point of manufacture in order to facilitate the tracing of them. The gathering also agreed on recommendations to strengthen the management of state-run arsenals, from which arms are often smuggled.

"Today's agreement is a significant step forward for the international effort to tackle the illicit gun trade," Rebecca Peters, director of the London-based International Action Network on Small Arms, said in a postconference statement.

However, peace advocates have noted that the document does not address the problem of ammunition, nor does it oblige countries to mark firearms at the point of import, which IANSA said "would significantly increase the effectiveness of tracing."

James Cairns, the program director of Religions for Peace, a New York-based interfaith coalition, and Allison Pytlak, a disarmament specialist with the group, both characterized the final result as a "mild outcome."

They noted in an interview that the agreement is less significant than advocates would have liked but a more successful result than in 2006, when a similar UN conference ended without any agreement.

"The faith community has been on the frontlines dealing with this issue, and we'd love for governments to be doing more," Cairns said, noting that in countries with serious firearms problems, such as Brazil, the church and other religious bodies had

taken the lead in grassroots disarmament work.

While 134 UN member states voted for the agreement, Iran and Zimbabwe abstained. The U.S. was not present for the vote and took little part in the deliberations. Cairns said the U.S. has one of the best records in tracing weapons but is unwilling to take this expertise to a multilateral level.

William Kenney, a Catholic bishop from Birmingham, England, and a participant at the conference, said, "The sheer size of the arms industry would shock people."

The trade in small and light weapons amounts to some \$4 billion annually, according to the Small Arms Survey, a Geneva-based research project that released its annual report as the July 14-18 conference began. *-Ecumenical News International*