

ARF CBMs SEMINAR ON CONVENTIONAL ARMS  
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THE UNITED NATIONS REGISTER OF CONVENTIONAL  
ARMS : transparency through confidence building.

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Allow me at the outset to express my great satisfaction to be here in Phnom Penh for this Seminar on Conventional Weapons Transfers organized within the framework of the ASEAN Regional Forum.

In my presentation I will refer to an instrument some of you may be familiar with, the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms. In doing so, I will look into the nature of this mechanism as a Confidence Building Measure of particular relevance in a regional context.

Ladies and Gentlemen ;

The UNROCA was created back in 1991. At that time, the original sponsors of the resolution that would establish it were, as many others around the world under the impression that for the first time in many years, a real opportunity was at hand to do something about conventional weapons, weapons that are actually manufactured, traded -often illegally- and used in dozens of deadly conflicts around the world.

Anyone familiar with arms control, arms limitation and disarmament will agree that if there is an area which has proved historically intractable for multilateral measures it is precisely conventional arms.

And this is nothing to be surprised about.

So, when the idea came to try and set the foundations of a voluntary mechanism for the exchange of information on arms sales and acquisitions, a general feeling of skepticism became apparent.

And there were reasons for that.

In the past, countless initiatives had been discussed in different fora, only to be discarded or simply put aside in view of the unbearable pressure of the Cold War imperatives.

But, for once, the idea of a mechanism to report on certain military transfers , promoted by a number of governments in an unusual display of synchronic goodwill, was given a chance to materialize in the Register.

This happened almost ten years ago and since then the Register has been in operation.

In general, in each of the calendar years of the operation of the Register, over 90 governments have submitted reports on arms transfers. Indeed , the level of participation is one of the highest compared with similar international reporting instruments, such as the United Nations system for the standardised reporting of military expenditures.

In this sense one can affirm that while it approaches its tenth anniversary, the Register has been confirmed as a valid and relevant

instrument in the field of transparency in armaments.

Of course some observers view the bottle as half empty. Others, prefer to see it half full.

What is important in my view is that the Register has maintained a fairly consistent level of participation that allows us to observe that it actually covers, on the qualitative side the great bulk of arms trade in the seven categories of conventional weapons, as almost every significant supplier and recipient of such systems submit reports regularly.

But let it not be any misunderstanding.

The work is far from being completed.

For the Register to fulfill its promise, much more needs to be done ; and this is one of the reasons why I believe this meeting is so important.

The title of my presentation refers to Confidence Building, as I am convinced that the contribution the Register can make to mutual confidence and an enhanced climate of security among States can be very significant ;

The notion of the Register as a CBM, which describes accurately the essence and the intent of the system, may for some be an indication of incompleteness.

For this current of thought, any approach based on the creation of mutual confidence is seen as a substitute for real, hard, arms reduction or arms limitation measures. While the sentiment behind that view may be legitimate and indeed laudable, a sober reading of the international situation, ten years after the rather premature announcement of a New World Order, confirm the timeliness and

more than that, the validity and the necessity of sound confidence building mechanisms as the Register.

On the other hand, there are observers that point at the Register as an exceptional mechanism through which highly sensitive information is being requested.

Neither of the two approaches is correct.

As you know, the Register in its present form covers the seven main categories of conventional equipment universally recognized as indispensable for major offensive operations. Lying behind this particular format we can identify the proclaimed and shared objective to avoid excessive and destabilising accumulations of armaments. Data and information is submitted in a way that allows States to provide as much transparency as they want. This flexibility, is precisely one of its greatest advantages.

Ten years after its inception, the Register starts to collect data of an increasingly good quality. The accumulation of calendar years allow us gradually to establish patterns.

And all of this is the result of an agreed mechanism set up under the aegis of the United Nations.

Seen in this perspective, one could ask why is the promotion of the idea so important then.

The answer is simple : even if the Register exists and functions reasonably well, the degrees of transparency it provides continue to be minimal. But further DEVELOPMENT of the Register depends on the degree of acceptance States will in a final analysis give to it. If countries see the value of participation against abstention the Register will gather the indispensable momentum that it needs to get stronger, in other words, to cover more and to do it efficiently.

And so far, participation is not universal.

A system like this requires steady growth and an increasing participation of States if it is to be successful.

Transparency can only be sustainable if it is mutual.

Transparency adds to national security when by investing in it, States get more in return than they would obtain by simply sticking to good old secrecy.

In the successive reviews of the Register carried out by governmental experts one of the main arguments repeatedly put forward to oppose or delay any measures aimed at strengthening it was that the Register had first to become more universal. Only when a vast majority of States would participate, we would move forward with it.

And there is a considerable degree of truth in that appeal. Universality, or in practical terms, the greatest possible participation is essential.

This is why in the review we carried out last year a deliberate effort was made to look long and hard into the regional picture. And we did so convinced that only by understanding the priorities and needs of the different regional scenarios, we would be able to understand the particular attitudes towards the Register.

We know that the Register -being a political exercise- cannot be considered in isolation of the surrounding conditions. Our information system is not just another statistical account. It is a data base on arms systems purchased and sold and this makes it radically different from any other in existence.

A logical consequence of this is that in areas of tension we will not always find the better response.

However, gray zones are vast when it comes to determining what constitutes a zone of tension. It would be all too simple to renounce to get certain regions of the world or even States individually to participate based on the comfortable justification that tensions exist and so transparency in armaments cannot be realistically considered.

The question to be asked is, on the contrary, to what extent can participation in the Register turn out to be a useful instrument to promote stability and mutual confidence.

On a less politically loaded note, our analytical exercise on regional responses also showed the pervasive influence of bureaucratic or technical impediments that may be preventing a good number of States from participating.

The sum of all these arguments led us to the conclusion that it was time to come to where things happen. Leave the rooms of the United Nations and listen to what practitioners have to say.

The results of our assessment were also quite revealing in as much as they showed significant variations in reporting patterns for different areas.

In this part of the world for example, broadly defined as Asia and the Pacific, the overall level of participation is relatively modest. Of course, in such a vast geographical space, characterized by so many different specific conditions and particularities one needs to tune up the observation by means of a sub regional focus.

In Africa, participation is simply dismal. Latin America, the part of the world I come from has shown a relatively good level of participation but it is still far from what one could logically expect.

This is why the ARFs initiative is so promising and important. ASEAN countries can be proud of a very interesting level of participation throughout the years.

It is our sincere hope that in the next Report of the Secretary General, the handful of countries which so far have chosen not to join us will consider participation. In any case, our presence here is a testimony of our decision to listen to the experience of all, provide clarification if needed and most of all maintain a dialogue on transparency in conventional arms transfers.

In my view there are a number of reasons supporting the notion that it is in everybody's interest to join the ranks of those who have chosen to participate in the Register:

1. The Register, meaningful for all.

A striking finding of our relentless study of statistics shows that a large number of countries which do not participate are those that would be likely to return what we call a NIL return, that is to say a very simple submission stating that they have not traded in the seven categories covered by the Register for the period under consideration. States in that position could logically ask why take the time and energy to fill out a form that basically says nothing.

The assumption is wrong.

*A Nil Report says a lot.*

By a deliberate choice to participate a State indicates its support for transparency measures adopted and managed by the United Nations. It also sends a powerful message for other States in the region, which may or may not be participating and may or may not trade in the seven categories. This message is also heard by the rest of the

international community that is in a position to see more clearly what is going on in a certain part of the world.

This first idea leads me to a point that has been repeatedly been made by critics of the Register.

The argument is that the Register, conceived as is around seven major categories of arms fails to address the security concerns of many regions, including Africa some parts of Asia and Latin America, where the problem is the handgun, the machine gun, the 75 mm artillery, even the machete, and certainly not missiles, attack helicopters or sophisticated aircraft.

I would not dispute this.

In fact it is because we have seen the logic of the argument that we have tried very hard in the course of the successive reviews to turn this aspiration into a reality. Accordingly numerous proposals for adjustments have been considered which include lowering of calibers and thresholds, to bring the chart closer to the developing nations concerns. It is clear that there are some gray zones where the categories covered by the Register could well get into the territory of what is considered the realm of small arms and light weapons. The debate is pretty much open and this year an International Conference on the Illicit Trade in those types of weapons will be held at the United Nations.

While hoping for the best results for this important Conference, one should not forget that this Register is already there, it exists and it provides for Member States wishing and willing to do so the opportunity to be more transparent by providing information on their Military Holdings and Procurement through National production. There is also room in the UNROCA for any additional background information that States may deem appropriate. So possibilities do exist within the present Register to come forward with more data



and information.

The point I am trying to make here is that the more States participate, the closer we get to universality, the stronger our voice will be to promote a more developed Register, as envisaged a decade ago.

## **2. The Register, promoter of dialogue.**

For States actually trading in one of the seven categories, their participation is also a signal of support for the concept of transparency in armaments. Their acquisitions or sales are not to be put into question, as the Register is not an arms restraint or limitation measure, but their attitude of reporting them is certainly a sign of a willingness to enter into a dialogue on security issues. One of the recommendations approved in the course of the last Review is the appointment by participating Governments of an official, national point of contact in order to deal with queries arising from the national submissions with a view to resolving any possible misunderstandings. This will undoubtedly sow the seeds of a dialogue, bilateral or regional as appropriate, that can facilitate the establishment of regular and even systematic ties and consultation channels on conventional arms issues.

The role of the United Nations Secretariat, through the unique expertise of the Department for Disarmament Affairs must be revisited in this sense ;

## **3. The Register, a non discriminatory, multilateral tool.**

Participation in the Register implies a recognition of and compliance with a multilaterally agreed norm of Confidence Building. This does not mean that participating States hold the high moral ground, while others remain subject to moral condemnation.