Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 1524 (2006)[1]

The need for greater transparency in the arms trade

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Over the last decade, Council of Europe member states have made progress in tightening up national norms and regulations to control the arms trade and in improving international co-operation in this field. However, the arms trade remains such a secretive business, frequently involving a complex chain of transactions and transfers, delocalised production, and sales through third countries and use of intermediaries, that it is often impossible to understand which weapons have been exported where and who the final users will be.

2. The Parliamentary Assembly considers greater transparency in the arms trade as fundamental to ensuring good governance, accountability, prevention of human rights abuses and violent conflict and minimising the risk of weapons being diverted into the black market, to criminal or terrorist groups or in order to breach embargo decisions, thus threatening the political stability and security of people, in Europe and elsewhere.

3. The introduction of greater transparency would also help ensure that economic considerations are not prioritised over human rights, human security, conflict prevention and non-proliferation, that governments are held accountable for their political commitments in the field of defence and foreign policy, and that episodes of fraud and corruption in the armament sector are reduced.

4. The Assembly welcomes the progress made at multilateral level to intensify the confidential exchange of information among governments as regards the arms trade. It also notes with satisfaction that some Council of Europe member states are parties to a number of such mechanisms, including the Wassenaar Arrangement, the European Union Code of Conduct on arms exports and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) information exchange mechanisms on small arms and light weapons.

5. However, the Assembly believes that progress in the confidential exchange of information at governmental level should be matched by enhanced public transparency through the publication by each country of detailed annual reports on arms transfers, the development of regional reporting mechanisms and better use of existing multilateral ones, such as the Register of Conventional Arms and the Commodity Trade Statistics (COMTRADE) database, both set up by the United Nations.

6. Above all, the Assembly is convinced that parliamentary scrutiny is the most appropriate instrument to achieve greater transparency and accountability in the arms trade, while preserving the competitiveness of a country's defence industry and respecting the confidentiality of the government's national security policy. The Assembly therefore regrets that good practices, such as prior parliamentary consultation over the issuing of licences in sensitive cases, as well as regular reporting by governments to national parliaments regarding the arms trade, or parliamentary debates on the issue, are still rare and limited to a few Council of Europe member states.

1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee*, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 17 November 2006 (see Doc. 11079, report of the Political Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mrs Ohlsson; and Doc. 11080, opinion of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, rapporteur: Mrs Westerlund Panke).

7. In this context, the Assembly takes note of the Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU) resolution on the role of parliaments in strengthening control of trafficking in small arms and light weapons and their ammunition, adopted on 12 May 2006, which suggests a series of measures to improve parliamentary involvement in this field.

8. Similarly, the Assembly welcomes the initiative taken, among others, by some Council of Europe member states to promote the negotiation, within the United Nations, of a legally-binding arms trade treaty (ATT). In particular, the Assembly welcomes the circulation on 24 July 2006 of a draft United Nations resolution entitled "Effective control over the import, export, and transfer of conventional arms", to be tabled at the First Committee of the UN General Assembly in October 2006, which is intended to set this process in motion.

9. In light of the above, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member states to:

9.1. ensure the highest possible level of transparency and accountability in the arms trade by:

9.1.1. imposing on governments the obligation to publish comprehensive, detailed and clearly structured information on national arms transfers (including imports, exports, transit and trans-shipment) to be submitted to parliaments for debate at least once a year;

9.1.2. considering introducing a mechanism of prior parliamentary consultation over the issuing of licences in sensitive cases;

9.1.3. implementing appropriate procedures to facilitate enhanced parliamentary scrutiny over the government's activities in the field of the arms trade;

9.2. promote enhanced international co-operation in the regulation and control of the arms trade by:

9.2.1. supporting the successful negotiation within the United Nations of an arms trade treaty which also takes into account the impact of the arms trade on women;

9.2.2. complying fully and in a timely manner with the reporting requirements stemming from their participation in the UN Register of Conventional Arms and other multilateral mechanisms to which they are parties;

9.2.3. establishing, together with interested non-European countries, an informal group to examine how best to use the UN Register of Conventional Arms and other multilateral mechanisms to further reinforce transparency in the arms trade;

9.2.4. developing regional registers on conventional arms transfers, including data on small arms and light weapons.

10. The Assembly calls on those Council of Europe member states who do not participate in the COMTRADE database, or only provide partial data, to fully adhere to this mechanism at the earliest convenience.

11. Finally, the Assembly calls on national parliaments to promote the establishment of an international parliamentary network with a view to assisting parliamentarians in increasing the level of domestic transparency in the arms trade through the exchange of information and models of good practice.