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Support an Effective Arms Trade Treaty

The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) is a developing UN treaty that aims to establish common global standards for how countries import, export and transfer conventional weapons. The poorly regulated global trade in conventional arms currently facilitates serious abuses of human rights and impedes sustainable development efforts throughout the world, especially in countries such as the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). For example, despite the establishment of a UN arms embargo on armed groups in the DRC, arms transfers have continued to pour into the country and fuel serious violations of human rights in the region, resulting in the deaths of millions of people, the displacement of 200,000 civilians, the widespread rape and abduction of women and children, and the prevalent use of child soldiers. In nearby Sierra Leone, girls represented approximately 30% of child soldiers in rebel forces, many of whom were armed through a systematic pattern of illicit arms exchange from 1998-2002. Unfortunately, many of these girls did not survive; only 8% of the 6,900 children formally demobilized were girls.

These examples provide a glimpse into the devastating impact of the unregulated arms trade. It is vital that the international community adopt a strong Arms Trade Treaty in order to protect millions of lives and livelihoods. As the ATT negotiations move forward at the UN, Amnesty International calls on the United States to support a comprehensive scope and a strong human rights parameter in the final treaty text.

The Arms Trade Treaty negotiations are currently underway at the United Nations in New York, with the final diplomatic conference scheduled to take place in July 2012. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced in October 2009 that the United States would seek a “strong and robust treaty that contains the highest possible, legally binding standards for the international transfer of conventional weapons.” The consequences of the poorly regulated trade in conventional arms are dramatically felt throughout the world, especially in developing countries where the constant flow of guns impedes sustainable development and facilitates serious abuses of human rights. Therefore, it is encouraging that US negotiators have now taken a leading role in the discussions surrounding the scope, parameters, and implementation mechanisms of the proposed treaty.

However, Amnesty International is concerned about the recent decision by US negotiators to oppose the inclusion of ammunition in the scope of the treaty text. Ammunition is already included in the list of items in the US Munitions List that require a license from the US government before an export is authorized. With nearly twelve billion bullets manufactured every year—approximately two for every man, woman, and child on the planet—it is crucial that the international community establishes common standards for how countries export, import, and transfer these deadly items. Indeed, an Arms Trade Treaty that does not include ammunition would do little to address many of the atrocities that we have documented in places such as the DRC, a war-torn country inundated with weapons and in which armed groups require more bullets, not necessarily more guns to carry out serious violations of human rights.

Amnesty International is a grassroots organization with 2.8 million members worldwide working to promote and defend human rights.

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Therefore, in order to protect lives and livelihoods in countries such as the DRC, ammunition must be included in the scope of the treaty text.

Moreover, Amnesty International considers the inclusion of a robust human rights parameter as crucial to the treaty's effectiveness. The treaty should require that states prohibit transfers of arms if there is a substantial risk that the arms would be used for serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. Such a measure would be consistent with US domestic export controls as well as international human rights standards.

The United States already includes these standards in US arms export controls and therefore, it should now take the opportunity to play a leading role in promoting these standards in the ATT negotiations. Furthermore, the mandate of the treaty negotiations prohibits it from interfering with domestic Constitutional protections to possess weapons. Therefore, the treaty will not have an impact on gun ownership and sales in the United States.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL USA RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The US government should support the inclusion of ammunition in the scope of the proposed Arms Trade Treaty, consistent with the scope of the US Munitions List.
- The US government should support the inclusion of a clear human rights parameter in the ATT that would mandate that governments shall not authorize arms transfers if there is a substantial risk that the arms would be used in serious violations of human rights or international humanitarian law.

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