

GUN VIOLENCE & SMALL ARMS PROLIFERATION

“Whenever arms flow, violence follows”, UN Messenger of Peace, actor Michael Douglas



Globally there are at least 640 million firearms, one for every ten people. Guns are the primary tools used to kill, threaten and intimidate civilian populations. They are easy to obtain, and readily available. Beyond injuries and the loss of life, the wide availability of handguns creates a climate of fear and lawlessness. *Small arms* are weapons designed for individual use, including revolvers, self-loading pistols, rifles, carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns. During conflicts, small arms devastate civilian's particularly children's, lives. Long after peace agreements have been signed and the soldiers have gone home, the high prevalence of small arms in post-conflict society perpetuates a culture of violence. The escalating proliferation of gun violence creates an environment which fosters a culture that is more likely to accept the violence of war.

As stated by Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General, at the UN's 2006 Small Arms Review Conference earlier this year: *“We do not wish to deny law-abiding citizens their right to bear arms. . . Our energy and our anger are directed against illegal weapons. Our targets remain unscrupulous arms brokers, corrupt officials, criminals, and others who bring death and mayhem into our communities. To halt the destructive march of armed conflict and crime, we must stop such purveyors of death”*.

It is estimated that each year several hundred thousand people are killed by guns. So devastating is the impact of these weapons, they are considered one of the major obstacles to achieving sustainable human development. From the rural roads of Darfur to the streets of Philadelphia, guns are wreaking a swath of death and loss.

In the United States every day, seventy-seven people are shot to death; they are the casualties of war, a war caused by guns. By comparison, during the many years of the Viet Nam war, approximately 58,000 thousand Americans died. As a medic with the U.S. Marines in Viet Nam in 1970 I tried to save the victims of guns and other weapons. One Marine I failed to save was shot in the chest while our unit was on patrol in the mountains on the Laotian border. After a bullet perforates the layers of skin, muscle, and bones, it travels through the human body shearing, tearing, and crushing the tissue and organs in its path. It produces a cavity that fills with blood from ruptured blood vessels; this cavity may be as much as three times the diameter of the bullet. Here's what probably happened to the Marine who was shot: The bullet hit the bone and cartilage of his sternum, which flattened the bullet somewhat, increasing its diameter, widening its path as it punctured his heart. In its passage the bullet stretched and displaced the heart muscles, valves and chambers, forming a hole the size of a baseball. Briefly his heart continued to pump blood from the bullet holes in the heart wall, filling the chest cavity at a rate of about five quarts a minute. But there was no pressure to carry blood through the aorta and arteries. With no blood, there was no oxygen, just death.

The United States is one of the largest gun manufacturing, gun importing, and gun exporting nations. More than 300 U.S. companies produce arms and/or ammunition. The resale of guns is largely unregulated in the United States. Legal bulk purchases of weapons by gun traffickers or straw purchasers are then resold on the streets illegally to criminals and juveniles. Locally Philadelphia is suffering an epidemic of gun-related deaths. Fear, physical pain, and death are the price we are paying for our easy access to guns. Weapons, particularly illegal ones, are shattering lives and ruining families.

Locally we must demand that our elected officials support sensible gun legislation. Globally we must support programs that provide incentives for arms collection and destruction. Resources need to be channeled to provide training and education to youth as an alternative to violence.

We must do all we can to foster a culture of peace which promotes alternatives to violence and guns. We must stop the carnage.

Resources:

Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence - www.bradycampaign.org/

CeaseFirePA – www.ceasefirepa.org CeasefireNJ - www.ceasefirepa.org

Coalition to Stop Gun Violence - www.csgv.org/

United Nations - www.un.org/events/smallarms2006/

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