Bob Green's editorial from the SSAA website

In July this year (2008), I attended the Third Meeting of the United Nations on controlling the illegal trade in small arms and light weapons as an invited member of the Australian Government delegation. Our Association was also represented by National Secretary Kaye McIntyre and our Federal Parliamentary Lobbyist Tim Bannister. In effect, we had two positions from which to influence those who would in the future form and vote for the illegal trade treaty: one from within the Australian Governments perspective and one as an official Non-Government Organisation (NGO).

The first thing to understand is that the treaty is not necessarily a bad thing. While not nearly at the stage of being agreed upon, it aims to restrict firearms and small arms such as hand-held rocket launchers to national governments; that is, rebel groups in theory could not legally buy rocket launchers from another country under the agreement.
So what does this have to do with us? Like many meetings at the UN, various groups like to add their two cents worth and try to broaden the scope of the agreement. The International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), the main anti-gun group in the world and permanently based in New York, where the UN is also based, unsurprisingly, has made many efforts to influence UN members to accept personal firearm ownership and trade restrictions within the treaty. This attempt to drag personal firearm ownership into the make-up of the treaty is quite contrary to what the original purpose of the agreement was; that is, to stem the illegal trade of firearms and light weapons, particularly in civil wartorn countries with ethnic and social unrest in everyday reality. Our job at the UN is to make sure that recreational shooting and hunting do not get unfairly treated and to remind the delegates that organisations such as the SSAA have a voice too.

IANSA is headed by Australias own Rebecca Peters, who many may remember was the chair of the National Coalition for Gun Control during the gun buy-back fiasco of 1996. There is no doubt IANSA is influential and many poor and developing countries actually welcome IANSA and its anti-gun agenda as it opens the doors to funding to those countries from wealthier countries and the UN itself. An African country, for instance, may apply for funding to train army armoury staff, build an armoury or train customs officials in firearm transfers. Papua New Guinea, during the UN meeting, expressed hope that it would receive funding to implement another of its countrys gun buy-backs, which they estimated would cost $6 million. Some have described this exercise as a blatant international transfer of wealth.
While many of the projects that they request funding for may sound legitimate, the effectiveness, honest expenditure of money and accountability raises many questions. As we said in our statement to the UN, the wounds of ethnic and political unrest cannot be healed by simply removing the weapons of choice of the day. The five-day meeting itself was an unusual affair to the uninitiated. With more than 200 countries represented and NGOs such as ourselves in attendance, speaker after speaker would ingratiate themselves with the Chairman, congratulate him on his re-election and thank him for his excellent presentation of the meetings agenda items. In short, it can be a talkfest.

On the fourth day of the meeting, delegates were presented with a draft of the meeting recommendations. This came as quite a surprise to many, as the recommendations had not yet actually been talked about! The Iranian delegate took strong objection to this unusual form of democracy and stated that this would set a precedent in future disarmament discussions. He said he rejected the rule of take it or leave it.

In the end, on the final day, in the final hour (in fact, the interpreters had already left, as they had worked their shift), a vote was taken and 144 countries voted for the recommendations, with Zimbabwe and Iran abstaining. The USA delegate and many others failed to attend the vote, which, in itself, spoke volumes about what they thought of the treaty and perhaps the UN. The agreement is not the ratification of the treaty, but merely an agreement on the way forward to eventually form a treaty.

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