

By [Farangis Abdurazokzoda](#)

WASHINGTON, Apr 25 2014 (IPS) - Even as countries around the world have started to sign on to and ratify a landmark international treaty that would for the first time regulate the international trade in conventional weapons, experts here are warning that the treaty in itself will not be able to maintain peace and security in Africa.

The [Arms Trade Treaty](#) (ATT) was almost unanimously passed by the U.N. General Assembly in April 2013 following a decade of often contentious negotiations. It covers small arms to battle tanks, combat aircrafts to warships.

“Without import control regimes along with export controls, it will be hard to reap the benefits of the treaty.” -- Thomas Countryman

Thus far, 118 states have signed on to the treaty, though only 31 have ratified the agreement. Ultimately, 50 ratifications will be needed before the ATT can come into effect.

Of the 31 states that have ratified the treaty, just two have been African – Nigeria and Mali. Yet even if, or when, more African governments decide to ratify the ATT, experts here, including some who helped negotiate the treaty, say its effect in maintaining peace in Africa will be somewhat limited.

“The ATT is an important step toward prosperity, peace and security in Africa, but by itself is not enough,” Thomas Countryman, the chief U.S. negotiator on the ATT, said this week at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a think tank here.

In a follow-up interview, Countryman told IPS that African countries played a “very valuable role” in advocating for the treaty, but acknowledged the impediments that developing countries in Africa may face in institutionalising and implementing the ATT before and post-ratification. He also noted that the United States and the European Union are prepared to assist in the ratification and regulation process as required.

[Most African countries](#) did sign the ATT, except for Egypt and Sudan, which abstained from the General Assembly vote. In addition, Somaliland, Sierra Leone, Western Sahara, Equatorial Guinea, and Sao Tome and Principe took no public position.

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For now, Countryman says, it is critical that countries implement effective and transparent export and import arms control mechanisms.

“Without import control regimes along with export controls, it will be hard to reap the benefits of the treaty,” he stated.

An important part of this, Countryman says, is implementing effective border control and customs services, both in law and practice. Other steps include the establishment and implementation of an effective legal framework for the prosecution of both internal and external illegal arms trades.

This includes, Countryman notes, the need for stronger mechanisms over government weapons.

“It is essential ... [that] African states institute effective controls over state-owned stockpiles of current and legacy weapons,” he said.

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Many armories in Africa were built during the colonial period or the early days of independence.

“Additional arsenals were purchased legally by the governments in the cause of national security for the military and the police,” he continued. “However, such arms are not always adequately secured.”

Securing such caches is not an obligation under the ATT, which deals solely with the international transfer of arms. However, Countryman notes that such a concern is directly related to the goals of the treaty, particularly ensuring civilian safety.

Transparency is key

“The treaty is complimentary to other actions that should be taken to stop violence perpetrated with illegally traded conventional arms,” Raymond Gilpin, the dean of the National Defense University (NDU), here in Washington, told the CSIS panel discussion on Wednesday.

Gilpin particularly emphasised the role of partnerships between the public and private sector in tackling the illicit arms trade. In this, he said, a similar model could be seen in global attempts to force greater transparency in the extractives sector in developing countries.

“As with minerals, if we leave the decision-making to the state alone, we might face reluctance in developing more transparency, a lack of resources or corruption in implementing the ATT requirements. Furthermore, one has to consider the influence of violent non-state actors in arms trade and diversion,” Gilpin said.

“Price stability as well as predictability of supply and demand relies heavily on transparency... Transparency is one of the main pillars of the ATT, and a lack of this element costs companies a lot of money.”

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Gilpin made specific reference to an annual publication called the [Transparency Barometer](#), put out by the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey. While the barometer serves as an important outlet for policy-relevant research on small arms and armed violence, Gilpin said, it focuses mostly on the exporting countries.

Control and transparency in the import-control regimes is also a very important aspect to tackle the illicit trade of arms, he cautioned.

African countries need to be more prepared for the ratification and implementation of obligations imposed by the ATT, Gilpin warned.

African states could be hindered in ratifying the treaty due to “a lack of capacity and expertise to draft the laws and prepare documentations for the parliamentary submissions, but also include state complicity,” he said.

Furthermore, certain countries view the import and management of arms as national security-related secrets. Thus, he suggests, confidentiality might be holding some countries back from ratifying the treaty.

Gilpin also emphasised the importance of strengthening public awareness about the need to prevent crimes associated with the gun violence, particularly during election campaigns on the continent.

“People get desensitised to the issue during the periods of relative peace and stability,” he said. “But to prevent conflicts from escalating and to maintain peace, civil societies need to more actively push elected officials to take more action to tackle the issue.”