



United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs

by Megan Sarian [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs is one of 14 U.N. bodies or programs that carries out mine action work. UNODA's work focuses on advising the U.N. Secretary-General's efforts to fulfill obligations to the Ottawa Convention and the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. This article outlines UNODA's goals, partnerships and recent progress with disarmament efforts, particularly concerning the nonproliferation of SA/LW around the world.

The United Nations General Assembly created the Office for Disarmament Affairs in 1982, though UNODA's name has changed several times since its inception. UNODA's purpose is to advance nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, chemical and biological weapons, and conventional weapons such as small arms/light weapons and landmines. It achieves these goals through offering organizational support for regional disarmament branches, assisting the U.N. Secretary-General with decision-making on disarmament matters and disseminating information about the U. N. contributions to disarmament.¹



UNODA often partners with other U.N. disarmament bodies to help move mine-affected countries closer to fulfillment of the Ottawa Convention and the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. These entities include the General Assembly, the Disarmament Commission, the Conference on Disarmament and the Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters. UNODA also supports the U.N. Institute for Disarmament Research, which conducts research to explore and create innovative solutions for the lack of security in conflict-laden nations.²

Organizational Structure

UNODA is headed by the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Sergio de Queiroz Duarte.³ Under the direction of the High Representative, there are five branches operating within UNODA:⁴

CD Secretariat and Conference Support Branch. Based in Geneva, this branch supports the Conference on Disarmament, which negotiates disarmament treaties by assisting with its organizational and substantive needs.

Weapons of Mass Destruction Branch. This branch focuses on the disarmament of biological, nuclear and chemical weapons. Its goal is to promote nonproliferation efforts around the world and this branch joins with appropriate intergovernmental organizations and specialized U.N. agencies to offer disarmament support.

Conventional Arms Branch. CAB works to curb and prevent the proliferation of weapons not addressed by the WMD branch, such as SA/LW. CAB offers support to help facilitate conferences for the U.N. Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons and the Arms Trade Treaty process, among other agreements. CAB also serves as chair to the U.N. Coordinating Action on Small Arms.

Regional Disarmament Branch. RDB has a narrower focus, which is to support regional and subregional centers for disarmament. This branch offers advisory and coordination services to relevant organizations, as well as assists with security development. RDB supervises and helps plan activities for the Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and Caribbean Regional Centres for Peace and Disarmament.

Information and Outreach Branch. IOB educates the disarmament community by providing publications, organizing events and programs, managing an informative website⁵ and maintaining databases for the General Assembly and other areas. The *Disarmament Yearbook* and *ODA Occasional Papers* are two of the publications released by IOB. The resource disseminated most often by this branch is the *UNODA Update*, an electronic newsletter produced quarterly.⁶

Recent Progress in Regional Strategizing

UNODA's Regional Centres have helped strengthen regional disarmament efforts through coordinating a variety of seminars and workshops. UNODA sponsored a capacity-building workshop from 11–12 June 2008 through its Conventional Arms Branch and its Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean. A total of 33 representatives from 17 Latin American and Caribbean states attended the meeting. The participants reached agreements on topics such as the need to establish effective SA/LW security and stockpile management systems, and the importance of communication between subregional law enforcement in partnering to combat illicit SA/LW trade.⁷

In May 2010, 11 member states of the U.N. Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa unanimously adopted the "Central African Convention on the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons, their Ammunition, Parts and Components that Can be Used for their Manufacture, Repair or Assembly." At the request of member states, UNODA—specifically its Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa—expanded the implementation plan for the Convention. The Convention provides a more cohesive regional strategy for SA/LW control that takes the institutional and cultural differences of each region into account.⁸

Additionally, UNODA contributes to regional coordination efforts by helping states implement the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects. UNODA helped with implementation efforts by arranging a series of meetings, which allowed member states to hammer out common goals and suitable timelines for accomplishing their regional PoA objectives. These meetings took place in Sydney, Australia for the Pacific region in June 2009 and in Kigali, Rwanda for the African region in July 2009.⁹

UNODA also organized a regional meeting in Bangkok, Thailand in February 2010 through its Regional Centre in Asia and the Pacific. The seminar discussed means for stopping illicit SA/LW brokering and addressed the need for tighter regulations to curb the illicit trade, which will involve capacity-building and improving law enforcement.¹⁰

SA/LW Control in Miscellaneous Areas

From August 2008 to July 2009, UNODA was one of six U.N. organizations supporting the inter-agency Armed Violence Prevention Programme, which assists governments as they combat armed violence. Along with supporting governments in controlling SA/LW proliferation, UNODA wants nongovernmental agencies to be involved in the battle as well. To evaluate the level of NGO participation in stopping illicit SA/LW activity, UNODA's Regional Centre in Asia and the Pacific hosted a workshop for NGOs in February 2009 that addressed this concern.⁹

UNODA's work is not just limited to helping governments and NGOs. In July 2008, UNODA partnered with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to facilitate a dialogue about the harmful effects of small arms mismanagement on civilian populations, especially when children are exposed to or involved in violence. The panel discussion was titled "Conflict of Interests: Children and Guns in Zones of Instability" and was intended to emphasize the importance of this issue among U.N. entities.⁹ The February 2009 Occasional Paper contains the outcome of the discussion.¹¹

An Asset to the Disarmament Community

The Office serves not only to advise the U.N. Secretary-General on important disarmament matters, but also works with the U.N. Mine Action Team, as well as regional and subregional centers to encourage nonproliferation of conventional arms and WMDs. At the Fourth Biennial Meeting of States on Illicit Trade in Small Arms from 14–18 June 2010, representatives from Austria, Trinidad and Tobago and Germany specifically encouraged UNODA to continue

creating helpful reports and assisting with the development of implementation methodology for the PoA.¹² Governments and organizations around the world recognize the important part UNODA plays in disarmament efforts and will most likely seek its counsel and coordination abilities for years to come. ↕

Biography



Megan Sarian joined the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery in January 2009 as an Editorial Assistant. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English in May 2010 from James Madison University.

Endnotes

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Contact Information

Megan Sarian
 Editorial Assistant
The Journal of ERW and Mine Action
 Mine Action Information Center
 Center for International Stabilization and Recovery
 James Madison University
 E-mail: maic@jmu.edu



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