

Roiling the waters: Canada Spurs OAS Consideration of Proliferation Issues



Canada's SSEA Barbara McDougall (front row, second from the left) at the 21st OAS General Assembly in Santiago, Chile.

"Throwing a bomb into the quiet waters of the OAS" is how one was described Canada's proposal, broached in April, to include on the agenda of the 21st General Assembly an item dealing with weapons' proliferation. Indeed, Canadian officials had to work overtime in Ottawa, Washington and other OAS capitals to dispel initial concerns that the subject was unsuitable for OAS attention and that its consideration would adversely affect hemispheric security.

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By the time delegations gathered in Santiago in early June, however, bemused or resistant reactions had turned to support. Member States adopted by consensus a resolution in which they resolved to support efforts aimed at stopping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, to exer-

cise sensitivity in arms transfers and to initiate a study of the problems posed for international security by arms proliferation (see text on next page). Among the resolution's 23 co-sponsors were Argentina, Brazil, Chile and the USA.

In adopting the resolution, the General Assembly was guided by the decision taken by OAS foreign ministers earlier in the week to initiate a process of consultation on hemispheric security, including arms proliferation. Canada's Barbara McDougall, who had urged her colleagues to deal with proliferation in the so-called Santiago Commitment, welcomed the decision. "In addressing this problem," she said, "OAS foreign ministers are sending an important political signal to all regions of the world about our commitment to contributing to international peace and security in the post-Cold-War era."

Canada's initiative in the OAS was an outgrowth of its global non-proliferation initiative launched in February. Canada believed that the OAS was particularly well-placed to take a lead in combatting proliferation and excessive arms build-ups because of the steps Member States had already taken to reduce arms, military spending and tensions within the hemisphere. Although the General Assembly had in the past dealt with arms-control-related matters such as clandestine arms traffic, conventional arms limitation and the advisability of establishing a mechanism for the inspection of weapons and military personnel, it had never looked at the broader issue of proliferation.

As a result of the resolution, the OAS has established a working group to study questions related to arms proliferation and excessive arms build-ups. Among other things, the group will examine the possibility of exchanging information about national policies, laws and administrative procedures governing the transfer and procurement of arms, and the possibility of establishing a mechanism for consultations about situations where excessive arms build-ups appear to be developing. The working group will also study questions related to hemispheric security in general, as follow-up to a Honduran-initiated resolution adopted by the General Assembly.

The OAS's attention to proliferation is particularly important insofar as the Organization is the first regional group that includes a substantial number of developing-world arms suppliers and recipients to seriously address these questions. In adopting the Canadian-initiated resolution, Member States signalled their willingness to consider closer cooperation in issues related to arms transfers and restrictions. OAS study of the subject should lend support to international processes to curb proliferation. In addition, it has the potential to result in regional arrangements that are tailored to the particular needs of the hemisphere and might go beyond what can be agreed internationally. ■