



Journal Letter from QUNO – Geneva

Sophie Buxton, Journal Letter No 2, March 2006

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Dear Friends,

As I sit down to write this a February fog has settled on the city, hiding the otherwise scenic beauty of Geneva, the “Bise” wind threatens from the North and I find myself increasingly following the tendency of many in this town to head towards the mountains every weekend in search of sun, snow and winter sports in all their variety! This hectic activity of my social life is reflected in a busy work schedule that leaves me floundering for the right starting place to convey a good sense of all that I have been engaged in over the last few months.

In my last journal letter I explained that much of the focus of work for the Disarmament and Peace programme at present is on small arms. At the end of 2005, just before the Christmas break, I was involved in the drafting of position papers related to various aspects of the small arms problem, to feed into the debate about how to take these issues forward within the framework of the UN Programme of Action (PoA) on small arms. January 2006 saw disarmament negotiators heading to New York for the PrepCom for the Review Conference of the UN PoA (if you thought Quakers had too many acronyms of their own, try combining Quakers and the UN!). This is the start of the 2006 Review process of the current international agreement on controlling the illicit trade in small arms, which will set the agenda for states’ commitments to work in this area in the coming years.

It is unfortunate that this process is taking place in New York, (and not just because I was left behind in the office in January!) The small arms community is much less engaged in New York than in Geneva, where the Geneva Process has, over the last few years, brought governments into contact with other actors in the small arms field for dialogue on best practices for implementation and developing of existing commitments. The absence of parallel activities on the other side of the Atlantic is going to be just one of the stumbling blocks in preparing the way for a significant outcome from the July Review Conference.

A far greater problem, however, is likely to be the very fact that the international community in this instance is bound in its decision-making by the rule of consensus. This poses an interesting question, it seems to me, familiar as I am with our own Quaker processes of this sort. Surely, it should be a positive practice, and to be encouraged, that at the highest international levels states act and make decisions on the basis of consensus? Unfortunately, consensus as we see it currently practised in various disarmament fora is not only a far cry from the Quaker search for the ‘Spirit of the Meeting’, but also a deplorable misuse of the very concept of consensus. Time and again in multilateral negotiations certain

states essentially use the consensus rule as a veto, preventing even the most progressive members of the international community from taking steps towards increased commitments to disarmament.

These same restraints of consensus decision-making are often blamed for the impasse in the Conference on Disarmament (CD). On January 31st 2006 I attended the 1000th plenary session of the Conference on Disarmament. Amidst statements on the history and current state of the CD, US President John Kennedy was quoted several times: "What is mine is mine, what is yours is negotiable!" It is this attitude more than anything else that is responsible for perpetuating the inflexibility of positions and prevents any consensus being reached, even on a programme of work, let alone on binding commitments to furthering disarmament.

As the 2006 session of the Conference on Disarmament got under way there have been calls for increased NGO engagement with the CD, despite its incredible lack of activity in recent times. The community of disarmament NGOs in Geneva are responding to this challenge, despite the lack of formal access to this particular body. However, as I write, proposals are being considered to allow the NGO statement to the CD on International Women's Day to be read to the Conference by the authors themselves, rather than by a member of the secretariat. Statements in recent weeks have been dedicated to the symbolism of the opening of the curtains in the historic Council Chamber of the UN building where the CD meets. Whether all states are willing to extend this openness beyond the rhetoric remains to be seen.

Interestingly enough the one major success in the history of recent disarmament efforts, the 1997 Landmine Convention, was not only conducted outside of the usual disarmament negotiating fora, but the process also side-stepped the consensus rule, allowing different states to progress at their own speed towards this commitment. QUNO was previously very much involved with the landmine ban, and in December 2005 I had the pleasure of attending a two-day conference on ways of linking mine action into development programming. Building in formal mechanisms to account for the cross-cutting nature of such disarmament issues is essential to determining their full success – something it would also be great to see in relation to the small arms process. Despite arriving at this landmine event with little in the way of specialised background knowledge, I received a very warm welcome from all sides. This was perhaps at least partly due to that fact that the sign in front of me, which, instead of bearing the usual QUNO acronym, simply said 'Quakers'!

Back at my desk, and with the Occasional Paper on Small arms demand (that I mentioned in my last letter) published, I turn my mind to other issues. One area that has been sorely neglected in relation to small arms, and that QUNO is now contributing towards promotion of, is that of survivor assistance. Services for victims of gun violence should not only be provided as a kind of afterthought, but also incorporated into national planning and recognised as an essential preventative measure, with the potential of reducing future resort to violence. A few states are beginning to pick up on this, but much research is still needed in this area in order to feed substantively into the Review Conference and influence its outcome. If we are to truly learn the lessons of success from the Ottawa Landmine Process, bringing the humanitarian effects to bear in what are essentially arms control negotiations is essential.

And so I've come back to where I began: QUNO's contribution to efforts to advance the UN small arms control process. Looking back at what I have just written, I notice how much I jump between various issues. I hope that this doesn't make this letter too confusing for my readers, and that you can recognise that this does indeed reflect a reality of work here at QUNO – juggling work in as many areas as this little office can!

I shall leave you here – it's Friday evening; and true to the best of Swiss traditions I have a fondue to prepare and a ski trip to plan!

With peace and friendship, Sophie

