



MERIDA, MEXICO – The availability of guns has been declared a fundamental cause and risk factor of violence by the health chiefs of countries in the Americas. The Health Ministers of 30 nations agreed that urgent action must be taken to prevent gun violence.

The agreement came in a declaration signed at the 2008 World Conference on Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion in Merida, Mexico. The USA did not sign the declaration.

The Americas is the region worst affected by gun violence, accounting for nearly half of the world's global gun death toll of 1000 people per day. 48% of all firearm-related homicides and 47% of all firearm-related suicides occur in this region.

Most governments see gun violence as an issue of crime or policing, rather than public health. But doctors from around the world agree that it is a preventable problem which should be addressed in a similar way to disease, or road traffic safety.

Dr Ime John, co-president of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) said, 'Guns are manifestly bad for human health. The international public health community cannot afford to ignore the impact of firearm homicides and injuries on individuals, families and communities. Development agencies must invest in armed violence prevention programs, which to date have largely been ignored by international aid donors.'

Dr Emperatriz Crespin of the IANSA Public Health Network in El Salvador said, 'Firearms are involved in 70% of homicides in my country. A gun in the hands of a young gang member is 20 times more lethal than a knife. Treating gunshot victims places an enormous burden on the El Salvadoran health system and there are few resources to rehabilitate survivors. Firearms are also the most effective mechanism to intimidate and perpetrate sexual, psychological and physical violence against women. As a doctor, I witness this daily in the emergency rooms, delivery rooms and living rooms of El Salvador.'

Rebecca Peters, director of IANSA, the global network against gun violence, welcomed the Health Ministers' declaration. She said, 'This is extremely timely, because governments around the world are currently reviewing their policies on firearms as they prepare for the UN meeting on small arms in July 2008. Up until now, health departments and health workers have been excluded from these discussions. Governments in the Americas should follow the lead of their Health Ministers by including the public health community in their policy reviews and in their delegations to the UN meeting.'

For further information on the Declaration, the IANSA movement against gun violence or the UN small arms process, please contact Louise Rimmer on +44 7900 24 28 69