There is plenty to be done over the next three days to come to agreement on an outcome document for the Second Review Conference of the UN Programme of Action (PoA) and strengthen commitments to full PoA implementation until the next Review Conference in six-years time. But across the hall in Conference Room 4 this morning (5 September) there is another UN General Assembly (GA)-sponsored event for which the issue of illicit small arms is directly applicable.

In that room, government delegates and civil society will participate in an informal interactive dialogue on the “Report of the Secretary-General on the responsibility to protect: Timely and decisive response”. Such response refers to a wide range of tools and capacities—both preventive and coercive—that the UN both has and needs in order to be able to provide credible and effective response to the threats of mass atrocities.

The Responsibility to Protect norm (RtoP) was introduced into the UN system in 2005 at the World Summit, based on the notion that the international community has a ‘last resort’ responsibility to intervene to protect civilians when states prove unable or unwilling to protect their own. The norm has been the focus of intense scrutiny in light of its controversial application in Libya and its non-application in Syria. Among the issues that have been debated in previous GA sessions including the role of the Security Council, the need for more robust preventive capacities, gender dimensions of atrocity crime response, and the role of regional actors in preventing atrocity crimes.

The conversation about how best to prevent atrocity crimes leads naturally to a discussion of the threats to societies that can, if not properly addressed, lead to violence that can even rise to the level of such crimes. In this list of threats, the problem of illicit small arms rises quickly to the top. All summer long, delegates to the arms trade treaty and PoA processes have been reminded by government and civil society colleagues of the devastating impact of illicit small arms and diverted arms transfers on communities worldwide. The ready availability of weapons by an array of non-state actors greatly complicates state and international efforts to protect civilian populations and, even more, impedes efforts to restore peace and stability to communities that have been victimized by widespread violence.

The relationship between the presence of illicit arms and the commission of atrocity crimes might be contributory more than causal. But there can be little doubt that so many weapons in circulation finding their way into so many unauthorized hands creates profound security challenges for states and equally grave health, development, and participation-related problems for communities long past the end the shooting.

Global Action to Prevent War urges PoA delegations to pay attention to the RtoP process, including the discussion across the hall, as we consistently urge RtoP advocates to pay more attention to PoA processes. The need to prevent mass atrocities is one of the most compelling rationales for delegations in the PoA to take firm steps to eliminate illicit weapons and end the practice of diverting transfers. The clear and direct role of illicit weapons in the commission of the most horrific crimes should help motivate more compelling outcome language and more robust implementation commitments.