

From where did the armed gang who recently attacked a private TV and radio station get their guns?

Were the guns licensed or unlicensed? These are very relevant questions, which the law enforcement authorities should be pursuing, whether civil society raises them or not.

Every month, emergency regulations are extended by Parliament, with the Government telling us that there are still national-security dangers. There is a distinction between national security and human security. National security means protecting our sovereignty, the Government and territorial integrity about which we hear incessantly.

But we must also be aware of the need to protect human security, which is the personal security and human rights of each and every individual.

Some countries, including democracies, are only concerned with national security. Having secure states does not mean you automatically have secure peoples.

Last year, we Sri Lankans rejoiced when President Mahinda Rajapaksa led our military to victory over terrorism. But over a year has passed and we still do not have a lasting political solution to consolidate that military victory – a solution to provide human security, as well as national security.

Weapons-collection programmes and de-weaponisation of society should be an integral part of any post-conflict situation.

The prevalence of easily concealed weapons in post-conflict situations prolongs instability and hinders efforts to reintegrate displaced populations and ex-combatants.

National governments must take the lead in destroying surplus, confiscated or collected small arms and light weapons, and ensure security of state-owned weapons in storage facilities.

In the years of terrorism, both in the south and the north of our country, we developed a gun culture. The country was flooded with small arms and weapons. Nobody felt secure without a gun and every politician had an armed security detail.



MEDIA SERVICES PHOTOFILE (ANURUDDA)

PLEA FOR 'AVIYATA THITHA'

Jayantha Dhanapala's clarion call for a campaign and stricter laws to put an end to the gun culture that is permeating our land.

But even after the LTTE was defeated, we haven't seen a replacement of the culture of violence with one of peace. There is violence at the level of the village and there is violence in cities. Guns contribute to this.

We have a national campaign against the consumption of liquor led by the President, called 'Mathata Thitha'. Should we not also have a programme against guns, which we can call 'Aviyata Thitha'?

The availability of small arms and light weapons feeds conflict and crime. About 60 per cent of human-rights violations in the world have involved the use of these weapons.

In Sri Lanka, we need stricter laws for gun control. The existing Firearms Ordinance goes back to 1916, and the British colonial era.

We do not even have reliable estimates of how many guns we have licensed and unlicensed. Some NGO surveys say there are 1.9 million firearms in circulation. And according to news reports, guns owned by the LTTE are frequently being discovered. Are we sure they go into the custody of the Government?

There are guns which deserters from our armed forces have carried away from the battlefield that may have gone into the underworld. There are trap guns illegally used by farmers that are misused for criminal activities. Guns should as far as

possible be owned by the security forces only, and private ownership must be licensed and be for justifiable reasons. In a post-conflict period, while ensuring that we are vigilant to prevent terrorism, we must also roll back the process of militarisation that has taken place in our society.

When I was in charge of the Disarmament Programme in the UN, in addition to urging strong action against nuclear weapons, I led a campaign against small arms which were directly affecting the peace and development of developing countries.

There are an estimated 875 million small arms in the world, 75 per cent of which are in the hands of civil society. They cause the deaths of about 500,000 people every year. Around the world, small arms

in the wrong hands destroy lives and livelihoods, impede peace efforts, hinder humanitarian aid, facilitate the illicit trade in narcotics and obstruct investment in people.

The UN held a conference in 2001 and adopted a Programme of Action to prevent the illicit trade in small arms. That Programme of Action is a globally shared responsibility to increase security and foster development for all. Every two years, and most recently this year, international conferences are held to review its implementation.

In New York a Preparatory Committee is also meeting to draw up an Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) which will regulate the trade in conventional weapons in the world.

We can use the many experiences in other countries to mop up surplus guns in Sri Lanka. I would like to see the destruction of surplus guns in our country, which I believe will symbolise more effectively the end of the gun culture and the defeat of terrorism.

If we really want to consolidate the peace we have won, the eradication of a culture of violence is a fundamental task. This can be achieved by curbing the proliferation of that symbol of violence – the guns that are owned by people outside the lawful armed forces of the country.

And so, Aviyata Thitha must be a priority campaign.



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The writer is an ex-ambassador of Sri Lanka and a former UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs.