



The NRA Takes on Gun Control -- in Brazil

By Kelly Hearn, AlterNet

Posted on October 25, 2005, Printed on October 26, 2005

<http://www.alternet.org/story/27279/>

Brazilians flatly rejected a plan to ban the commercial sale of firearms and ammunition in a historic national referendum on Sunday. The vote is a victory for Brazil's wealthy gun lobby which opponents say used strategies learned from the National Rifle Association to shift public opinion.

An estimated 122 million citizens took part in the referendum -- the first of its kind in the world -- and preliminary counts showed 64 percent went against the ban while 36 percent backed it. The referendum -- which asked the simple question "Should the commercial sale of guns and ammunition to civilians be prohibited?" -- divided the country, a world leader in gun deaths, into "*não*" and "*sim*" camps.

Two months ago, polls showed 60 to 80 percent of Brazilians favored the ban as a way to control the estimated 17 million small arms that are circulating in the country. But as the vote neared, and as both sides of the issue were given free television time, a slick media blitz by the gun lobby appears to have shifted enough voter opinion.

"The 'no' vote shows that the gun lobby successfully used its power and wealth to play on Brazilians' fear and lack of confidence in the state's ability to provide security," said Jessica Galeria of Viva Rio, a Brazilian gun control group. "But the results of the referendum don't mean that Brazil believes having more guns will bring peace. We will keep fighting for full implementation of the good gun laws introduced in 2003, which saved 3,234 lives the following year."

Some 39,000 Brazilians lost their lives to guns in 2003, according to the United Nations, which also says 500,000 Brazilians died from arms between 1979 and 2003. Like other Latin American nations where weak gun laws and sporadic enforcement are problems, Brazil also has porous borders, especially the Triple Border area, a widely recognized hub of contraband located at the border intersection of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil. That helps explain how in Rio de Janeiro, for example, the gun death rate among young people is 239 per 100,000 residents, twenty times more than America and 2,000 times greater than Japan's, according to IANSA.

Brazil's gun control laws are already strict. In 2003, lawmakers passed a landmark law that, among other things, dramatically restricted gun sales and outlawed the carrying of guns by civilians. The Disarmament Statute of 2003, which also mandated yesterday's referendum, caused a 13 percent drop in gun deaths last year, according to Brazilian government statistics. For his part, President Lula da Silva supported the ban but his Vice President and Minister of Defense José Alentar did not. Speaking to local media in early October, Alentar said he opposed the ban

"because he is in favor of liberty" and that a prohibition would only "encourage bandits" who "will always be armed."

Shady Campaigning

Activists groups such as the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), a UK-based global network consisting of more than 700 gun control groups, were hoping for a "yes" vote in part for the momentum it would give movements in other countries. But in the end they could not match the gun industry's money and what some critics are calling shady campaign tactics.

During the last decade, Brazil's wealthy but then-disorganized gun lobby was outmaneuvered by grassroots groups such as Viva Rio in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo's Sou da Paz, and the Brasilia-based Convive. As Congress addressed the 2003 bill, which had evolved from an earlier bill in 1997, activists organized marches and lobbied lawmakers. One march in Rio de Janeiro drew 50,000 people in support of the Disarmament Statute in Rio de Janeiro, according to IANSA and a popular television show plugged the debate into one of its episodes.

Sensing the restrictive laws coming its way, Brazil's gun lobby turned to the National Rifle Association, which in 2003 sent one of its Washington lobbyists, Charles Cunningham, to São Paulo to discuss strategies. The NRA would not disclose the contents of that meeting but said it has no financial ties with any Brazilian groups. Gun control activists say the NRA's influence was key in the referendum. Gun backers translated NRA materials into Portuguese and use statistics and arguments that were similar to those used in NRA infomercials aired in the United States. The thrust of the "no" campaign, mirroring NRA strategy, was to cast the ban as a violation of the "right" to have guns, even though Brazilians officially have no such legal right, says Galeria and other activists.

Some campaign materials also relied on other brands of fear mongering. One pamphlet, described by Reuters, featured an image of Hitler giving a Nazi salute in an effort to link the dangers of disarmament with Nazism. One particularly controversial tactic was unveiled last week. In one opposition commercial that aired in early October, the gun lobby inappropriately linked the image of Nelson Mandela, a gun control supporter, with its cause. The commercial at one point showed a newspaper photograph of Mr. Mandela on an earlier trip to São Paulo, raising his hand in solidarity. A voiceover said, "Nelson Mandela came out of prison to fight against apartheid and free the blacks in South Africa."

After the ban's proponents brought the commercial to the attention of Mandela's legal representative, his attorney, Don MacRobert, contacted Brazilian Congressman Alberto Fraga, president of the Parliamentary Front for the Right to Legitimate Self Defense, a pro-gun group. MacRobert said it was "incorrect, improper and illegal" to use Mandela's image in the video and to make reference to "Mr. Mandela's fighting against apartheid when such struggle bears no relation to the issues described, i.e., the sale of guns."

Fighting Global Gun Control

The vote shines a spotlight on the NRA's role as a global provider of political strategy and support for gun groups around the world, and its focus on fighting U.N. attempts to control the flow of the estimated 639 million small arms and light weapons IANSA says exist in the world.

In an upcoming book, Wendy Cukier, a criminology professor and president of The Coalition for Gun Control, reports that in recent years NRA has shelled out in-kind contributions to international groups (such as strategy consultations) and funded PR campaigns in countries such as Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, and South Africa. She also cites news accounts that the NRA in 1997 formed a kind of European gun lobby group with gun groups in 11 other countries including France, Germany and Italy. The NRA has also gained recognition as a nongovernmental organization from the United Nations' Economic and Social Council, which allows it to lobby the world body.

Andrew Arulanandam, NRA's director of public affairs in Washington, said the group supports laws that would cut U.S. funding for the U.N. if any of its programs stand to infringe on American's right to keep and bear arms. Two lawmakers, Representative Charles W. Boustany and Senator David Vitter, both Louisiana Republicans, have sponsored such bills.

"Any treaty passed by a transnational body such as the U.N. may still require support from the U.S.," Arulanandam said. "What would the fate of gun owners be under an administration headed by Hillary Clinton?"

With a U.N. Small Arms Review Conference set for June 2006, the NRA is watching IANSA, which is working with Oxfam and Amnesty International to raise support for the idea of an international treaty to control arms transfers. Activists say that, despite its outcome, the referendum is boost for gun control supporters (which the NRA refers to as "the global gun ban movement").

"We must remember that a ban is at the far end of the spectrum of gun control, and no other country has yet gone this far," said Anthea Lawson of IANSA. The fact a referendum was held at all, and that it was keenly followed by other governments, was a strong sign in favor of tighter controls.

"There's also the question of marketing and money," Lawson said. "By law, both sides had an equal amount of airtime to promote their views and before the media campaigning started the polls were firmly in favor of the 'yes' vote. The pro-gun lobby, supported by Brazil's arms industry and with advice from the National Rifle Association in the U.S., ran an extremely professional and slick campaign. The 'yes' campaigners could not compete with this kind of marketing budget, and relied on volunteers campaigning in the streets. The 'no' campaign successfully turned it into an argument about rights, when the real point that our colleagues in Brazil will continue to make is that the proliferation of guns does not make people safer."

The NRA says it is worried that Brazil is a stepping stone to an eventual assault on the Second Amendment. They worry that global gun control momentum could mean a U.N. treaty that could come up for ratification at a time when the NRA's foes are in power.

Furthermore, the NRA has recently been showing a northern neighbor tricks for building a lobbying group to head off what the Candadian Shooting Association calls the "U.N. Small Arms initiative to control and ban your guns."

"We have a federal election looming on the horizon and we must be prepared," according to newsletter sent out in recent days by the Canadian group. "And who better to show us how than the most powerful lobby group in the world, the National Rifle Association and their Institute for Legislative Action?"

Kelly Hearn is a former UPI staff writer who lives in Washington DC and Latin America. His work has appeared in the Christian Science Monitor, American Prospect, and other publications.

© 2005 Independent Media Institute. All rights reserved.

View this story online at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/27279/>