



ICRC

6th CONFERENCE OF STATES PARTIES TO THE ARMS TRADE TREATY (held by written procedure)

Statement of Peter Maurer, President, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Geneva, 17 August 2020

This year's Conference of States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty is overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which regrettably prevents us from meeting face-to-face. I would like to give special thanks to the President of the Conference, Ambassador Federico Villegas of Argentina, and to the ATT office holders and the ATT Secretariat for their efforts to advance the important work of this Treaty during the preparatory process, despite the very challenging circumstances.

Working on the frontlines of armed conflicts, the ICRC is witnessing how human suffering from widespread arms availability is being compounded by COVID-19, which presents a dramatic threat to life in war-torn countries. It has given rise to new humanitarian needs and exacerbated pre-existing protection risks. Men, women and children caught in the crossfire of fighting in countries which have been structurally shattered by war are particularly vulnerable to the current pandemic, which has also placed an additional strain on healthcare providers and infrastructure.

In April, hospitals supported by the ICRC in South Sudan were already at maximum capacity due to the high number of patients with gunshot wounds. After many years of armed conflict, half of the medical facilities in Syria and Yemen are not functioning, leaving their healthcare systems too weak to effectively respond to the pandemic. Access to life-saving healthcare is reduced or prevented by ongoing armed violence and even direct attacks against health-care, such as those that occurred a few weeks ago in Afghanistan.

With protracted armed conflicts and other situations of violence in many parts of Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia, I am concerned that serious violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights law continue to be fueled by a steady supply of conventional arms and ammunition. This is precisely what the Arms Trade Treaty has been designed to prevent, by establishing a global norm of responsible arms transfers. The tremendous human suffering which we witness every day in conflicts worldwide lend urgency to all States joining the ATT and faithfully implementing its requirements to the highest standards.

I am heartened by recent advances towards universal adherence to the ATT. I congratulate in particular the five States that have joined since the last Conference of States Parties: Afghanistan, China, the Maldives, Namibia, Niue and São Tomé and Príncipe.

The growing and diverse membership of the ATT attests to its universal reach: all States are affected by the poorly controlled arms trade, as it feeds conflict and insecurity, provoking displacement within and across borders and destabilizing entire regions.

Today, only four of the top 25 suppliers of major conventional arms remain outside of the ATT. The participation of major arms exporters and importers shows that the pursuit of responsible arms trade is compatible with economic, foreign policy and security objectives.

Indeed, if recent history teaches us anything, it is that arms supplies that facilitate serious violations of IHL or human rights law do not further peace and security. Alleviating human suffering must be the primary consideration in all arms transfer decisions.

I encourage the remaining 31 Signatories to swiftly ratify and call on all States not party to join this crucial Treaty at the earliest opportunity. The ICRC can provide technical support to assist States in their ratification process.

The ATT is a practical tool to reduce the human cost of war. But it can only deliver on its promises if States Parties faithfully implement their obligations under the Treaty, in line with its humanitarian objective. In this respect, I remain gravely concerned by the apparent disparity between the Treaty's obligation to ensure respect for IHL in arms transfer decisions and the arms transfer practices of too many States. This calls into question the Treaty's credibility and effectiveness.

The strict criteria of Articles 6 and 7 of the Treaty aim to ensure that weapons do not end up in the hands of those who would use them to commit serious violations of IHL or human rights law, or serious acts of gender-based violence. They must be applied in a consistent, objective and non-discriminatory manner by all levels of decision-makers, including at the highest levels.

Assessing the risk of violations is no trivial task. The ICRC has provided guidance to States in this respect, notably in its Practical Guide on Arms Transfer Decisions, which provides indicators for assessing the risk of arms transfers being used to violate IHL or human rights law. The ICRC stands ready to assist, within the scope of its mandate, policy and expertise, with efforts to implement the Treaty to the highest possible standard.

Exchange of practical experiences in implementing the Treaty, including the open sharing of how risks are being practically assessed, and other measures taken to control and mitigate the impacts arms transfers and to prevent the diversion of weapons, is important to ensure transparency in the arms trade -- one of the ATT's key purposes. A strong level of openness and timely, complete, accurate and transparent reporting on the implementation of the ATT demonstrates States Parties' commitment to a responsible arms trade. This is essential to building the confidence necessary for the Treaty's success.

In moments of crisis, we see ever so clearly the weaknesses in our global systems. The global reach of COVID-19 painfully reveals how the fragility of contexts affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence is a risk for everyone.

The pandemic underscores the need to mitigate and prevent health risks by addressing underlying vulnerabilities and systemic problems. It also invites us to reconsider the role and value attributed to weapons in securing human health and wellbeing. Amid suffering and uncertainty caused by this pandemic, it is troubling that precious resources continue to be sunk into arms build-up when they are desperately needed for health care and humanitarian assistance.

The current health crisis presents a singular opportunity to collectively build stronger health systems and a more sustainable and resilient world. Global threats require global responses and global solidarity. Multilateral mechanisms to curtail the spread and impact of weapons – such as the ATT – are essential to tackling humanitarian problems that no Nation can face alone.