

Security Council briefing by Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein High Commissioner for Human Rights on Small arms: the human cost of illicit transfer, destabilizing, accumulation and misuse of small arms and light weapons, 13 May 2015 New York

Madame President, Secretary General, Distinguished Members of the Council,

I am grateful for the opportunity to address the Council on the human cost of the illicit transfer, destabilizing accumulation and misuse of small arms and light weapons.

Madame President,

The bloodshed and devastation caused by these weapons never fails to elicit unanimous declarations of dismay. But when the international community is called upon to control more effectively the production and trade of small arms and light weaponry, States push for loose definitions, as well as numerous exclusions and loopholes, and enforcement remains weak. The reason is clear: the trade in small arms is a multi-billion-dollar business.

And yet the human and economic cost of armed violence also runs into the hundreds of billions of dollars. These are the weapons of the easy kill: the most portable, most easily accessible, most casual instruments of death – even a small child can, with its tiny muscles, vanquish a life. In war, however, appallingly, it is often the child that receives the bullet.

The vast majority of victims are not the live version of the silhouetted man on a white sheet of paper holding a gun, what law enforcement and militaries the world over use for target practice. The live version is very different. The majority of bullet-ridden and mortar-blasted humans are ordinary people, not combatants in armed conflict. They tend to be among the poorest or most vulnerable members of society: older people, women, children, people with disabilities. Frequently, they are the "left-behinds", people who cannot flee when danger looms, because they have nowhere to go or because they are not physically able to move. Many are killed; countless others are maimed, and may be permanently disabled.

If they were to reflect reality more closely, the silhouettes used for target practice would not then be menacing gunmen, but terrified people hiding under tables, or cowering in the corners of dark rooms with their families, or lying face down in a ditch. And why? Because war is not just the clinical fulfilment of some military or strategic objective, war, in the killing zone, often means a gruesome showcasing of human cruelty, and for reasons we still do not yet properly understand. Why does it have to be so violent to civilians and non-combatants? The pathologies of human behaviour have yet to determine why, but we do know: if the oldest companion of war is war crime; its bride is the profiteer.

There are simply too many who will indulge in the commerce of death, in the illicit business of arms transfers which is undeniably damaging to human life, and yet we rarely see those responsible for facilitating and abetting serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law held accountable in any way. We must place the protection of human life and human rights at the centre of this discussion.

The contrast is also breathtakingly stark between the comfortable profits of the brokers of these weapons -- not to speak the accompanying lifestyles of the more successful of them -- and the victims of their use, who in the majority of cases are likely to find no recourse or remedy for the torment and disabilities these arms and weapons have caused them.

We are all aware small arms do not only make easy the taking of lives, and the maiming of lives – they also kill economies, and the social bonds on which every kind of collective institution and progress rely. Their ubiquitous availability can contribute to the sustained denial of human rights, including to education and health, the lethality of criminal behaviour; the breakdown of social structures; illicit plundering of natural resources; decreasing trade and investment; rising violence against women and girls; gang violence; the

collapse of rule of law; and a generalised sense of impunity, opening up in many parts of the world completely lawless landscapes.

My office welcomes the convening of this meeting, and we appeal to the Security Council to continue to build on Resolution 2117 (2013). We also note the upcoming second open-ended meeting of the Group of Experts in a few weeks' time, and hope it will make serious progress.

Madame President,

The ATT's recent entry into force is a real source of hope, if more Member States ratify it, agree to implement it genuinely, particularly articles 6 and 7, providing for the human rights safeguards that are the treaty's heart. The Security Council should continue to provide strong support to the ATT, and it should mandate UN operations to build ATT implementation capacity into their regional and national assistance, hand in hand with capacity-building for human rights and rule of law institutions.

My predecessor, Navi Pillay, proposed to the Council in August 2014 that, when it came to the ATT, and "where there exist concerns about human rights in States that purchase small arms in large quantities, one condition of sale would be they accept a small human rights monitoring team." I too believe this form of innovative thinking deserves further elaboration and urge the States Parties to explore it, along with the distinguished members of the Security Council.

I thank you very much.