



ICRC

**5th CONFERENCE OF STATES PARTIES TO THE ARMS TRADE TREATY
26 August 2019, Geneva**

**Statement of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)
delivered by Gilles Carbonnier, Vice President**

Opening Session

Mr President, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen –

On behalf of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), I am honoured to address this Fifth Conference of States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty. I would like to give special thanks to you, Mr President, for your efforts in the preparatory process.

Today, millions of people live in the shadow of war and other forms of armed violence. Years, and sometimes decades, of conflict have devastating, far-reaching humanitarian consequences. Not just the direct effects of attacks on individuals and communities, but the indirect consequences that disrupt and destroy basic services. Beyond the immediate death and destruction, we see forced displacement, often on a massive scale; deteriorating services; increasing dangers for those working to provide lifesaving assistance; and persistent violations of international humanitarian law (IHL). And behind all of this lies a ready supply of arms and ammunition – the fuel for the fire.

With operations in more than 80 countries worldwide, the ICRC sees this suffering first hand. Every day, often for years on end. In fact, the average length of time we have been present in the countries hosting our 15 largest operations is more than 30 years. We are all too aware that the immediate and cumulative humanitarian consequences are severe when conventional arms are poorly regulated and widely available.

When I started my career with the ICRC in the early 1990s, I worked in El Salvador, at a hopeful time when we expected peace to bring violence to an end. But, years after the armed conflict ended, the continued widespread availability of weapons has fuelled levels of armed violence that are today among the highest in the world. Across northern Central America, the ICRC is working to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable members of communities, where violence permeates almost every aspect of people's day-to-day lives.

In Libya, to take another example, large parts of the arms stockpile remain outside any control. The armed conflict is exacting a heavy toll on the Libyan people, who suffer death, injury, disability and displacement. The ICRC is assisting thousands of families to meet their basic needs. But public services have collapsed in areas affected by the conflict. What was once one of the most developed economies on the continent is now in serious economic crisis.

Respect for the Arms Trade Treaty is critical to ending these cycles of armed conflict and other situations of violence – and preventing the ensuing human suffering.

The ICRC has a role to play in helping to build respect for the law. Protecting the most vulnerable and preventing IHL violations to limit suffering and destruction is in our DNA. However, this frontline action must be supported by two important elements: adherence to hard-won legal frameworks, and political commitment. Primary responsibility for respecting IHL – and ensuring respect by others – clearly falls to States.

The Arms Trade Treaty places strict controls on the flow of weapons to belligerents and other armed actors. These rules are founded on the duty to uphold IHL, enshrined in Article 1 common to the Geneva Conventions – which marked their 70th anniversary this month. Like the Geneva Conventions, the Arms Trade Treaty aims to protect people, save lives and reduce suffering, based on the universal principle of humanity.

These rules are not an abstract norm. They are a practical tool in the interests of all to protect lives and, ultimately, in the interests of international and regional peace, security and stability.

Indeed, preventing the diversion and misuse of weapons goes hand-in-hand with maintaining peace, security and stability. The two endeavours are interconnected. Violations of IHL and human rights law can undermine regional and international peace and security. To put it in business terms, fidelity to the Treaty's humanitarian objective reduces the bill of humanitarian assistance, which has dramatically increased over the last few years.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, while I'm convinced of the enormous benefit of the Arms Trade Treaty, we can never take its relevance for granted. To remain useful and effective, the Treaty's provisions must be applied diligently at the national level; and its application recorded, reported and monitored on the ground, where they matter most.

Five years after the Treaty entered into force, States must now engage in detailed conversations on the practical application of the Treaty. This year, the ICRC contributed to discussions on the risk that transferred arms will be used to commit or facilitate serious acts of gender-based violence.

In-depth exchanges like these must continue, no matter how difficult. Acknowledging achievements in applying the Treaty – and the challenges – is essential to enhancing its implementation and realizing the goal of universal acceptance.

The ICRC is conscious that arms transfers take place in a competitive environment. We also observe that arms transfers are just one way that partners support each other in the web of relationships that characterize contemporary armed conflicts. But respect for IHL must be factored into arms transfer decision-making, at every level, regardless of how complex the situation is. Humanitarian imperatives must never be trumped by economic, security and diplomatic interests. It is vital that the humanitarian perspective – particularly respect for IHL – is systematically placed at the centre of decision-making, as is required by the Arms Trade Treaty.

To conclude, Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, it is in multilateral fora like this that we build and defend the norms that uphold our humanity. This Conference provides an opportunity to share experiences and identify lessons learned. An opportunity to find practical and meaningful measures to turn the words of the Treaty into deeds, and to make a real difference for millions of vulnerable people. The ICRC stands ready to support you in this endeavour.

Thank you.