



Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
Statements to the Sixth Conference of States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty
17 August 2020

GENERAL STATEMENT

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) welcomes the ongoing commitment of the President-designate of the Sixth Conference of States Parties (CSP6), states parties, working groups, and other stakeholders to advance work in the sixth review cycle of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), despite the significant challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet these significant challenges cannot be overlooked or their impact disregarded. This is true for how ATT states parties and the broader arms control community must assess and hold to account non-compliance with the Treaty in a time of rising violence and heightened vulnerability—and for the ways and means in which our collective work occurs.

In its May 2020 written submission,¹ WILPF cautioned against proceeding with a 'business as usual' approach in this extraordinary time. The current crisis triggered by the health pandemic has exposed the fault lines of global economic and social systems. As WILPF has highlighted elsewhere, the pandemic has demonstrated that it is not guns and battle tanks that ensure global peace and security in a crisis such as this, but essential workers in the health and food sector, in public transportation, and in the provision of other essential services.²

Yet in some countries, including those that are party to the Arms Trade Treaty, arms production and sales continue apace. The year preceding the pandemic saw the largest annual increase in global military expenditure in a decade.³ Weapon manufacturing has been deemed an "essential service" by some states, able to carry on despite the closure of other industries, shortfalls in the production of essential medical equipment, and unsafe working conditions.⁴

¹ "Considerations and inputs to the President's paper on transparency and exchange of information and its role in the prevention of diversion," WILPF, 28 May 2020, https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/att/csp6-prep/WILPF_president-paper_May2020.pdf.

² Ray Acheson, "COVID-19: A Sustainable Ceasefire Means No More "Business as Usual," WILPF, 17 April 2020, <https://www.wilpf.org/covid-19-a-sustainable-ceasefire-means-no-more-business-as-usual/>.

³ "Global military expenditure sees largest annual increase in a decade—says SIPRI—reaching \$1917 billion in 2019," SIPRI, 27 April 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/global-military-expenditure-sees-largest-annual-increase-decade-says-sipri-reaching-1917-billion>.

⁴ See, for example: *Decreto del presidente del consiglio dei ministri*, 22 March 2020, <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/03/22/20A01807/sg> and "Il Virus Non Ferma Le Armi," 23 March 2020, <https://estremeconseguenze.it/2020/03/23/fabbriche-armi-coronavirus-essenziali/>.

This means that in the midst of a global health crisis, many countries are still engulfed in armed conflict. This has flooded already struggling health infrastructure with wounded civilians and put even more strain on populations suffering from violence and instability.

Following more than five years of war and the resulting food insecurity and destruction of vital infrastructure, civilians in Yemen are now dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Multiple ATT states parties either continued or resumed⁵ their arms transfers to Saudi Arabia and its coalition that is attacking Yemen. Airstrikes on Yemen by the Saudi-led coalition have increased over the last few months, often hitting civilian targets—including a COVID-19 quarantine centre.⁶ There are also ATT signatories providing arms to parties within Libya, in violation of a UN arms embargo and their in-principle commitment to the ATT,⁷ and in a year in which Libya has recorded the highest number of attacks on health facilities of any country in the world.⁸

The health pandemic has also seen a rise in other forms of violence. Gender-based violence, primarily against women and girls, has intensified globally at alarming rates, at a time when, particularly in settings of humanitarian crisis, there has been a reduced ability to respond or provide appropriate care.⁹ The personal acquisition of arms by individuals has also increased¹⁰ alongside violent crime¹¹ and some states or authorities have adopted militarised, at times violent, responses to COVID-19 that repress human rights.¹²

In the face of all these critical challenges, it is imperative that ATT states parties take action to stop arms transfers. Implementing the commitments agreed at CSP5 in relation to GBV and gender diversity is a good place to start. These commitments set out a clear blueprint for even deeper exchanges that could improve GBV risk assessment procedures and gender

⁵ See, for example <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/britain-arms-sell-saudi-arabia-military-exports-a9605636.html> and <https://nationalpost.com/news/saudi-arabian-canadian-arms-deal-improved-more-transparent-federal-government>.

⁶ “Yemen,” Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 15 July 2020, <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/yemen/>.

⁷ David Wainer and Samer Al-Atrush, “UAE Ran Covert Arms Flights to Aid Libya’s Haftar, UN Finds,” 15 May 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-15/u-a-e-ran-covert-arms-flights-to-aid-libya-s-haftar-un-finds>; and “Operation Irini: Turkey slams EU mission to contain arms to Libya,” Al Jazeera, 19 June 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/06/operation-irini-turkey-slams-eu-mission-arms-libya-200619160820054.html>.

⁸ “Libya COVID-19 cases double in 14 days as violence increases, exacerbating existing threats facing vulnerable populations,” International Rescue Committee, 12 June 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/libya-covid-19-cases-double-14-days-violence-increases-exacerbating-existing-threats>.

⁹ “UN chief calls for domestic violence ‘ceasefire’ amid ‘horrifying global surge’,” 6 April 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>.

¹⁰ Noah S. Schwartz, “Why Canadians and Americans are buying guns during the coronavirus pandemic,” The Conversation, 8 April 2020, <https://theconversation.com/why-canadians-and-americans-are-buying-guns-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic-135409>.

¹¹ Drazen Jorgic and Uriel Sanchez, “As Mexico focuses on coronavirus, drug gang violence rises,” Reuters, 18 June 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-mexico-cartels/as-mexico-focuses-on-coronavirus-drug-gang-violence-rises-idUSKBN23P1VO>.

¹² “‘Toxic lockdown culture’ of repressive coronavirus measures hits most vulnerable,” 27 April 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1062632>.

diversity in the context of ATT implementation. However, most states have not used this meeting cycle to make suggestions of where and how to progress on the CSP5 decisions within the working groups' workplans. No state reported back about any relevant changes or domestic activities enacted by the decisions at the first preparatory meetings, which took place in Geneva in early February this year, while written submissions made in May are not available for analysis. It is therefore disappointing that the draft workplans plans outlined for the ATT working groups and the draft CSP6 decisions do not adequately account for the agreements adopted just one year ago.

Transparency is also essential in this time, as it always is. Promoting transparency in the international arms trade is an agreed purpose of the ATT as set out in its article 1. It is also a key objective of all global disarmament and arms control regimes.

In its May 2020 written statement, WILPF wrote, "Given the unique circumstances resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and related changes to our normal ways of working, WILPF encourages [CSP6] organisers to ensure that any remote and virtual consultations are held in a transparent, secure, and accessible manner for both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders alike." It bears reminding that digital accessibility and security vary greatly from location to location and are informed by other factors.

It is worrying that certain aspects of the CSP6 meeting cycle and the ATT process more broadly are becoming less transparent. New bodies are being established in closed deliberations; states parties are being encouraged to make greater use of the restricted area of the ATT website; an increasing proportion of states parties are choosing to restrict access to their national reports; and written submissions provided as part of the CSP6 meeting cycle have not been published or made available.

WILPF, along with other civil society organisations and some states, is further concerned that the process initially agreed to for decision-making at CSP6 would not have permitted draft CSP6 decisions to be shared with all conference observers. This would have contradicted the Treaty's Rules of Procedure on the right to receive official documents, as well as the ATT's established practice. We welcome that there was a reversal of this decision and underscore that it is vital that procedures and actions taken this year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions are not reproduced in future as deliberate policies of exclusion. WILPF, through the website of its disarmament programme Reaching Critical Will,¹³ is committed to publishing statements, documents, and submissions from the ATT or other disarmament and arms control processes in order to aid monitoring and advance transparency.

In highlighting the above concerns and examples, WILPF seeks to call attention to the unique and rapidly changing environment and circumstances facing the world and its people right now. ATT states parties, signatories, and other vital stakeholders need to be more responsible, more responsive, and more vigilant. This is true for exporting states parties as they assess risk in dynamically changing contexts and sometimes with blind disregard of their legal commitments, as well as for the importers that are prioritising arms acquisition

¹³ See www.reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora/att.

over the health and safety of their people. All need to prevent human suffering and guard against the erosion of transparency. All states must also prevent shrinking space for civil society, whether in the context of international meetings, or in national consultation and engagement.