



# THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND – FEDERACIÓN LUTERANA MUNDIAL – FÉDÉRATION LUTHÉRIENNE MONDIALE

*Office of the General Secretary*

**EMINENT PERSONS GROUP  
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**Statement by Dr. Ishmael Noko  
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## **SMALL ARMS, BIG PROBLEM**

I am grateful for the opportunity to address this meeting of the Advisory Group of the Eminent Persons Group. I make this statement in many capacities: as someone who comes from a continent which continues to witness some of the worst consequences of the proliferation of small arms; as a religious leader who is commissioned to proclaim a message of peace and reconciliation; as a parent who prays for a secure and happy future for his children; as well as in my capacity as General Secretary of a global church family of over 60 million people in more than 70 countries around the world.

My message to you is that there is no compatibility between the proliferation of small arms and the proliferation of peace.

For many years, the need to control and reduce the proliferation of small arms has lacked recognition, compared to the intense debates over nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction. However, as people from my home region are well aware, many more people are killed by the mosquito than by the elephant.

Apart from the immediate and direct consequences in terms of deaths and injuries resulting from the saturation of some communities with small arms and light weapons, the wider consequences in terms of destabilization of communities and the psychological impacts upon whole societies are beyond estimation.

I also note with deep disquiet the emergence in some communities of the Kalashnikov or the M16 rifle as the new symbol of power, displacing older and more benign symbols of authority. Related to but going beyond the mechanical capacity of such weapons to kill and maim, in some communities they are now beginning to be cloaked with almost totemic significance - of a wholly evil kind. They have become the standards and symbols of the power of violence.

The small arms industry is the expression of a dilemma. On the one hand, in the world we live in weapons are needed to defend sovereignty, to control chaos and to keep peace. On the other hand, the proliferation of such weapons, in part through the efforts of manufacturers to find markets, has itself become a threat to sovereignty, to order and to peace. Neither is the distinction between the illicit and licit branches of the trade in small arms so clear. As non-governmental representatives said at the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms last year, all arms may be considered illegal when they are used to violate the basic principles of human rights.



It was also correctly declared by an NGO representative at the conference that our common efforts must be directed at the simple objective of a reduction in the number of human lives lost as a result of small arms proliferation. Our presence here is testimony to our shared belief that the Eminent Persons Group, and our deliberations as an Advisory Group, can make a significant contribution to that end.

A primary emphasis in our efforts is and must be the need for effective state control of the small arms industry and of transfers of small arms. These interests and processes must be subordinated to the interests of the State and of the international community in protecting human life and in preserving peace and sovereignty. The Paris Process, and the valuable work of the Eminent Persons Group, provides mechanisms through which this objective is being advanced.

I believe that it is a fallacy and an abdication of responsibility on the part of any who suggest that the proliferation of small arms cannot be controlled. It is possible to control this trade and to reduce the human suffering which flows from it, but it is also possible - and easier - to let go.

Monitoring, transparency and accountability are some of the major areas in which things have been let go. As our discussions have highlighted, an effective international regime for marking, record-keeping and cooperation in tracing weapons from the point of manufacture will be essential to rectifying this situation. Through support for such a regime, small arms manufacturers can become part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. The role of humanitarian aid organizations, organized civil society, religious communities and all concerned individuals will be key to creating the political will to establish a comprehensive and effective regime, and to holding manufacturers accountable to it.

Even without further unregulated flows of small arms and light weaponry, the existing levels of availability of such weapons in many societies in Africa and elsewhere will be sufficient to ensure a continuing harvest of death and destabilization for generations to come. I therefore believe that a much more determined emphasis needs to be placed upon the recovery and destruction of weapons, especially in post-conflict situations, as well as upon the control of future transfers of weapons. This must become a much more significant and effective priority of UN and other international peace-keeping efforts than has hitherto been the case, if those efforts are to be seen as more than merely token.

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons around the world has fallen on a fertile ground - a mentality of violence that has been promoted in many parts of the world by caricatured images of extreme violence in television, films and games. I cannot accept, as a matter of common sense, that such images do not breed a violent culture among our children and youth in many different parts of the world. The readiness with which small arms have spread and are utilized for violent and unjust purposes is connected, in my view, with the nature of this globalized popular culture of violence.

I also wish to take this opportunity to relate the objective of the control and reduction of small arms and light weapons to the broader context of endemic poverty, in which many of the most arms-saturated communities are trapped. In such situations the inter-relationship between poverty and transfers of small arms is a particularly bitter irony. While the violence and destabilization resulting from the widespread and unregulated availability of small arms obviously results in deeper and more widespread poverty, poverty itself promotes the further penetration of weapons throughout the society. Small arms cannot be effectively controlled, nor violence reduced, while an AK-47 is more accessible to a poor person than an adequate standard of living. In the absence of other alternatives, such weapons become a means for poor and desperate people to provide for themselves and their dependents. In addition to establishing monitoring regimes and weapons recovery and destruction programmes, it will be essential for the peace we all seek to work at the same time for the eradication of extreme poverty and to assure an adequate standard of living for all people.

This is a matter both of humanitarian and ethical imperative, and of pragmatic necessity for all nations no matter how peaceful and secure. Because in our interconnected and globalized world, it is no longer possible for one part of the human community to be in chaos and fear without the ripples washing upon more peaceful shores. Destabilized societies produce refugee flows, which increasingly are becoming a matter of public concern for all countries (though often especially in countries which have carried relatively little of the burden of caring for the displaced millions). And the desperation of communities caught in poverty and conflict feeds extremism and terrorism - whose reach, as the world now knows, is global.

As a religious leader, as an African, but most especially as a parent, I believe that we must all, as a global human family, address these issues as a matter of the greatest urgency and priority. I pray that our deliberations in this meeting will help to turn the slow and faltering steps of the international community into a determined run.