

A generation ago, battlefield weapons were too heavy and bulky for children to carry easily. Modern guns are lighter, smaller and more portable, making children more attractive as both supply carriers and fighters.

A Close Connection Between 'Small Arms' and Small Soldiers

The UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict has noted that 'there is a strong link between the accessibility of small arms and light weapons and the victimisation of children. The proliferation of these weapons has made it possible for very young children to be the perpetrators of violence'.

Sarah Meek: Evidence to the Tribunal

Thus the impact of small arms on children in armed conflict can be both direct and indirect. The direct effects result in children being fatalities and casualties of war (targeted or accidentally); and child soldiers, either voluntary recruits or forced labour, being coerced under threat into support roles for combatants and becoming victims of violence and violent crime. The indirect effects include restricted or prevented access to school, health care and social services, internal displacement, becoming refugees, and loss of family structures and support.

Ms. Meek referred to an International Committee of the Red Cross study on arms availability and the situation of civilians in armed conflict, which found that respondents to a questionnaire sent to its field workers thought that:

- 70% of civilians and 38% of children possess weapons;
- Civilians are targeted with assault rifles on a weekly basis (60% of respondents);
- Arms are used against civilians for criminal or coercive purposes (85% of respondents), on a weekly basis (60%).

She stated that in her opinion there is a lack of empirical information on how arms impact on children in conflict and post-conflict situations. In South Africa, for example, the number of firearms injuries among persons under 19 years of age increased in the Cape Town metropolitan region by 35% between 1992 and 1996, a period during which weapons availability increased. By 1996, firearms had become one of the top four causes of death among children and youth in the Cape Town region.

Ms. Meek drew the Tribunal's attention to a number of measures that could be adopted. An important consideration when considering measures to reduce the proliferation of small arms is that, in addition to restricting the supply of arms, we must also look at the need to change the way in which communities view violence and violent conflict and the use of small arms. As controls are improved over the legal trade in small arms in general, making the

trade more accountable to human rights principles and making trade more transparent – this should have an effect on reducing the proliferation of small arms. However, the challenge of existing stocks and illegal small arms remains. Currently there is no international control regime for small arms, although the United Nations is taking forward a conference process that should result in a *Programme of Action*, outlining concrete steps to be taken. One suggestion is that the international community should try to limit access to small arms for those countries or groups most likely to violate humanitarian law. Other proposals have been:

- To instil humanitarian principles in the general population;
- To increase the training of combatants in international humanitarian law (something the ICRC already does);
- To ensure personal security without resorting to armed conflict based on the premise that insecurity can often be a factor driving the demand for weapons.

During post-conflict phases several other steps could be considered, including:

- Demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration programmes focused on working with the children used as soldiers and directed at giving them the education and skills they need;
- Putting in place national legislation and regulations that criminalises the possession of illegal firearms and restricts civilian possession of firearms.

She also suggested that civil society could play a role at national and international levels in raising awareness about the problem of small arms and children and working on creative solutions. In doing so, making a plea to those working on children and on small arms to consider ways in which to co-operate to strengthen the message. The small arms community has formed the International Action Network on Small Arms, which might be a focus for work with the existing children and armed conflict networks.

Ms. Meek ended by quoting the statement of the UN Secretary General on small arms from the *Millennium Report*: words alone do nothing to prevent the ongoing slaughter of innocent people. Dialogue is critical but we must match 'the rhetoric of concern' with the substance of practical action.

Questions to Sarah Meek

In response to questions raised by the Tribunal, Ms. Meek gave details of the main suppliers of small arms. The manufacturers of small arms form a very strong lobby, which means that banning producers would require a long-term strategy. With respect to the legal trade, the main suppliers are the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The weapons concerned are not necessarily accounted for when they reach the destination, so some do enter the illegal