

Security Council High-Level Meeting on Small Arms, September 26th, 2013, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Ms. Bishop, Permanent Mission of Australia to the United Nations

I thank the Secretary-General for his briefing and report (S/2013/503), which have laid the foundation for today's discussion. I also thank the Vice-President of the International Committee of the Red Cross for her briefing and for the invaluable work her organization is undertaking.

Australia's region, the Indo-Pacific has experienced the devastating effects of the illicit transfer of small arms and light weapons. Thirteen years ago, our friends in Solomon Islands faced the very real prospect of becoming a failed State after long-simmering tensions boiled over into ethnic conflict. Militants raided police armouries, high-powered firearms — coupled with other weapons that flowed across porous borders — exacerbated the conflict. The results were devastating — a coup, widespread killings, breakdown in governance, law and order, and years of economic contraction.

Australia led the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) with fellow Pacific Islands Forum members, at Solomon Islands' request, to restore law and order. That meant getting guns out of the community quickly. During a three-week amnesty, more than 4,000 firearms were surrendered or confiscated by RAMSI. This early and decisive action underpinned the peace that was built and maintained over the next 10 years.

Small arms and light weapons have had similar effects elsewhere in our region — in Timor-Leste and in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. As a member of the Council, we are reminded all too frequently of the threat that the proliferation and misuse of these weapons can pose to civilians, to States and to international peace and security, including in Mali and the Sahel, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. These weapons pose a grave threat to civilians, to peacekeepers, to humanitarian workers and to civil society organizations. Their proliferation and misuse can undermine the rule of law and human rights, and destroy efforts to rebuild broken societies.

We have all learned valuable lessons on how this threat can be overcome. While States have the primary responsibility to prevent the illicit transfer and misuse of these weapons, many will need support to do so. Peacekeeping and political missions can play a key role, as we saw in Solomon Islands. This has also been the experience in Côte d'Ivoire, where a small but dedicated arms-embargo monitoring unit in the United Nations mission has made a real impact in supporting the government to combat illicit arms flows.

Assistance to States in managing their own weapons — those held by their security forces — will often be the starting point. For States emerging from conflict, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes for former combatants must be carefully designed and implemented, and weapons accounted for. Security sector reform must include effective weapons management. Such transition processes must be inclusive, with women's participation being crucial. Existing controls, including national regulations and arms embargoes, must be fully implemented. Regional organizations will often be able to play a pivotal role.

The international community has demonstrated renewed resolve to combat the threat posed by small arms and light weapons. The adoption of the Arms Trade Treaty this year was a landmark achievement that will help stop destabilizing arms flows to conflict regions and to illicit users. It will prevent human rights abusers and those who violate the laws of war from being supplied with arms.

The Council, by adopting resolution 2117 (2013) today, is demonstrating that it has an important role to play in addressing these challenges. The resolution will strengthen the implementation of the Council's arms

embargoes. It supports peacekeepers' efforts to limit the impact of these weapons on post-conflict societies. Most importantly, the resolution demonstrates the fundamental importance that the Council places on protecting civilians and of full respect for international humanitarian law and human rights.

This international momentum must be maintained. The Council has taken too long to adopt its first resolution on small arms. And I should note that Australia has built on the earlier work of others — including Argentina some years ago — to get to this point. The Council should consider these issues more systematically, return to this subject with greater frequency, and ensure that our commitments today are not forgotten tomorrow.