

18 August 2014

Hon Murray McCully MP
Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Parliament Buildings
Private Bag
Wellington

Dear Mr McCully,

Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand is an independent national section of the international peace movement, Pax Christi International. Our section was founded in 1993 and for the past 20 years has been advocating for the peaceful resolution of conflict at home, regionally and internationally. Like so many people worldwide, we have been grievously dismayed at the ongoing conflicts which are devastating so many people in the Middle East. On this occasion, we would like to focus on Syria.

As you are aware, diplomatic negotiations have failed to halt the atrocities occurring in Syria. The failure of the UN Security Council to achieve consensus on referring the Syrian conflict to the International Criminal Court on the 22nd of May was disheartening. Nevertheless, until a political solution is reached, every government has a responsibility to put diplomatic pressure on those actors exacerbating the conflict by supplying arms to warring groups in Syria.

The Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which opened for signature in June 2013, has not yet entered into force. Although we are pleased to see that your government has signed the ATT, we are wondering at the delay in showing our full support for it by ratification. Are there any reasons why this cannot be done immediately? Even when that is done, though, the ATT must be interpreted in such a way as to stop the arms transfers that continue the Syrian conflict. The ATT is not the only document governing arms transfers. All arms transfers' activities must be carried out in compliance with international humanitarian law and human rights law. An arms embargo from the UN would also be a very effective measure, and Pax Christi encourages you to raise this possibility during UN negotiations.

In addition, we strongly encourage your government to put diplomatic pressure on any states supplying arms to any side in the conflict, including to the Assad government and to violent opposition forces, both secular forces and jihadist groups. The Russian Federation and Iran are supplying weapons and ammunition to the Syrian government; several European countries and the United States are supplying or plan to supply arms to opposition forces; and support for the jihadist groups frequently comes from private donations in Persian Gulf countries, including Qatar and Kuwait. Arms transfers, whether to government authorities or to opposition forces, merely prolong the conflict and allow the atrocities to continue. Additionally, all nations should keep pressing for cross-border humanitarian aid to be allowed to assist some of Syria's most vulnerable citizens. Enforcement of UN Security Council resolutions 2139 (2013) and 2165 (2014) is essential. These resolutions, which seek to alleviate "chilling darkness," are mechanisms by which these humanitarian goals can be accomplished.

In the light of the immensely destabilizing impact that the flow of foreign fighters into Syria has on the region and the world, your government is reminded to exercise its full power to stop our citizens from taking up arms in Syria.

With over 160 000 deaths and six million displaced persons, the Syrian conflict continues to destroy Syria's population and its rich culture, inflicting tremendous suffering on all Syrians. The international community has a responsibility to do all it can to halt the atrocities. Even before substantive progress is made in diplomatic negotiations, all states have an imperative to do all that is feasible to prevent the atrocities from continuing. Applying pressure to halt the arms flow to Syria will lessen the amount of blood that is spilled in this ongoing conflict.

Pope Francis, on his recent visit to the Middle East, spoke out against the "lacerating" violence in Syria, and specifically called attention to those profiting from arms trade to Syria. Pax Christi International echoes his call for peace: "May God convert those who have projects of war. May he convert weapons manufacturers and traffickers so they become constructors of peace."

Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand sincerely appreciates your consideration, and we hope that you decide to take action on this most pressing of issues.

Yours sincerely,

Kevin McBride

National Co-ordinator, Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand