Next week, arms companies from around the world will be setting up shop in London for DSEI, one of the biggest arms fairs in the world. Government officials will meet with arms dealers to make the sales that fuel conflict, violence, and repression around the world. The weapons on display there today will be used in conflicts tomorrow.

Activists will once again work to shut down the arms fair and will likely be arrested for trying to prevent future atrocities. Here in Geneva, delegates to this meeting of the only legally binding treaty regulating the international arms trade have an obligation to do whatever they can to show that they intend to put people over profits.

Unfortunately, as in years past, several ATT states parties are sending the opposite signal to the world.

Many continue to transfer arms to Saudi Arabia, which has been relentlessly bombing populated areas in Yemen, destroying hospitals, schools, markets, and homes. These arms transfers have facilitated and sustained what the UN has described as the world’s worst humanitarian catastrophe. According to Yemeni NGO Mwatana for Human Rights, an estimated 50,000 people have been killed as a direct effect of the war and 14 million people are threatened by famine.

In Colombia in 2018, 548 women were victims of lethal violence with a firearm projectile (Institute of Legal Medicine). From January to June 2019, 4281 revolvers and 3107 shotguns were confiscated (DIJIN - Directorate of Criminal Investigation and Interpol with information from the Public Prosecutor’s Office). Colombia remains within the top 100 arms importing countries in the world in 2018 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute - SIPRI 2019). 2017 was for Colombia the year with the lowest homicide rate of the last 40 years. With the signing of the peace agreement, more than 12 thousand people handed over their weapons and began the return to civilian life.

How many more lives can be saved if Colombia ratifies the ATT and implements it?

These are only two examples; there are tragically many more. Yet inside ATT conferences of states parties, these cases are rarely discussed. The reality of the bloodshed, the sexual violence, the psychological trauma, and the destruction of entire cities is apparently not allowed to enter the conference room.

This must change.

Other UN bodies and mechanism are stepping up to provide assessments and recommendations for better implementation of the ATT and other arms trade-related obligations. In July, the Human Rights Council adopted by consensus a resolution on the impact of arms transfers on human rights. The resolution acknowledges the role arms transfers can play in facilitating gender-based violence and invites states to consider the recommendations produced by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2017. The Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights has recommended that governments suspend arms export licenses when there is a risk that arms could be used to violate human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights. The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women called on states to address the gendered impacts of international arms transfers through ATT ratification and implementation.

There needs to be better integration between the ATT and the UN’s human rights and disarmament mechanisms and processes, because right now, they are leading the way.
What else can ATT states parties do? The most important thing is to hold more focused discussions on Treaty implementation and considering responses to Treaty violations. Such discussions must be open to all states parties as well as international organisations and civil society, which can provide essential information and scrutiny.

States parties must implement the ATT with a view to enhancing peace, justice, and human rights, not profits and political manipulation. Export officials and governments must respect the prohibitions against transfers where there is a risk of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and war crimes as per article 6. They must equally assess the risks outlined in article 7 to refuse transfers where there is a risk, among other things, of human rights abuses or violations of international humanitarian law—including gender-based violence. States parties should also discuss how the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, which is resulting in human rights and humanitarian law violations in many countries, can be better addressed in ATT risk assessment processes.

Our world is being torn apart by violence, fuelled by weapons and other technologies of violence and repression. The ATT should be a serious tool to prevent human suffering but so far it is not living up to this task. We urge everyone participating here to reflect on your potential role in current and future conflicts—do you want to perpetuate the violence, or try to stop it by doing the work to improve this treaty’s implementation?