Response to presentation by Kiflemariam Gebre-wold

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Thank you very much Madame Chairman, and thank you very much, Kiflemariam for what I think is a exceedingly important area of inquiry. I can only say that I share the majority of the points that were made in this first presentation because I do feel that while efforts to restrain supply are needed, these efforts will be only moderately successful if at the same time we are not concentrating on mechanisms for reducing demand for weapons in different parts of the world. And that, for me at least, inevitably means having a better understanding of personal decision-making and group decision-making in community settings. It’s an area that I think is difficult to work in but which I’m also pleased to remark, does have an array of disciplines and specialists where I think there are some very important things to draw from.

I would like to pick up on three points made in Kiflemariam’s presentation. The first is the importance of his comment about failing social and political structures. I see this as being one of the fundamental problems or factors driving demand for weapons in different parts of the world. And I think it’s useful to look at the work of political scientists who have an interest in the processes involved in state failure and state collapse. When I went to medical school I never in my wildest dreams thought during medical school that I would end up some day reading with great interest the works of Thomas Hobbes, and studying political science essentially, but I think it’s highly relevant to this particular problem. There is a political scientist by the name of William Reno who some of you may know, who studies warlordism and failing states. He’s done a lot of work in Africa principally and western Africa. One of the concepts that he has coined is the concept of a shadow state. It’s all I guess to a certain extent playing with labels, you know you hear the words “quasi-state,” “collapsed state,” “shadow state,” whatever, but I think he presents four features that he feels have marked the political stage in the post-colonial period throughout the world but primarily in Africa where newly independent states set out on what the western world hoped would be productive state-building exercises. His argument is essentially that the logic of the colonial powers that gave independence to these countries was that these countries would then carry on and build wonderful states and be fruitful productive members of an international community. What he argues has happened is that in fact as opposed to developing effective bureaucracies, those in power in many of these settings have viewed that the development of an effective, functioning governance bureaucracy would actually pose a viable threat to their own power base. And they have actually taken efforts to actively undermine the development of effective
bureaucracies within their countries. So this is one point.

The second is that in this process there’s been a very marked tendency amongst these government leaders to co-opt elites and to favor certain ethnic groups within a country. Often not the ethnic majority but ethnic minority figures for political reasons. So there’s an element of co-optation of elites. A marked tendency toward the commercialization of government where government and the holding of power is actually no longer a governance function but is more a question of running a state as an enterprise and exploiting natural resources. And finally, his fourth point is a creation of insecurity – the deliberate creation of insecurity by government leaders and the selling of private protection, which ties in very well with your remarks about uniformed police forces actually leasing weapons to criminals and bandits. So I think that broad area of state collapse, failing social and political structures there’s a lot of very difficult issues in play. I don’t of course pretend to have any answers to how one goes about enhancing the quality of governance in these settings, but I think that that’s a fundamental challenge, and the international community I think has to think very carefully about how it can help with those issues.

The second point I want to pick up on that is I think in a way connected with this is the whole issue of security sector reform, and the integration of security sector reform with post-conflict interventions. I think this is also an under-explored area. We have many settings around the world where the perception is that national security is essentially purchased by increasing military expenditures. A great number of countries that really don’t have the resources to devote to buying more military hardware are doing so with of course the implied opportunity cost that they are not spending those funds on health and education for their people, better roads, better economic possibilities. And you have I think a very marked imbalance between a standing military and the serving police forces. So it’s an ironic situation if you think about the UN Charter which actually outlaws, makes it illegal to invade a neighboring country, that we have so many countries in the world with large portions of their budgets going towards standing armies ostensibly meant to ward off a threat from an external state when in fact the vast majority of the problems taking place in that country that are leading to insecurity are really internal policing matters. So the security sector reform movement which essentially is about trying to reverse this imbalance between standing police forces and standing military forces is I think an important area to work towards certainly in post-conflict. There perhaps a good example is the South Africa/Mozambique Operation Rachel, which many of you may know is an effort undertaken to find arms caches in Mozambique and destroy them that’s been set up between the South African and the Mozambican governments. The reason for South Africa to be involved is probably fairly evident, but an aspect that’s maybe not so evident is that the Mozambican police force is horribly under-resourced. They actually don’t have a lot of the basic infrastructure required to carry out the discovery and the decommissioning of arms caches. SO I think that’s an illustration of just how important the police forcing aspects are.
The final thing I’ll pick up on and then I’ll pass the mike along is the comments that you made about changing cultural norms. Kiflemariam talked about cattle raiding undergoing a major change with the arrival of automatic weapons in the Horn of Africa. I think that’s very true, but I also would argue that it’s not as simple as just a change in the weapon away from a spear or a club to an automatic weapon. There is good evidence that there’s been a change in the actual actors involved, and that actors external to the pastoralist sector with commercial motives are actually involving groups of paid bandits to carry out predatory types of raiding over very large areas. So that’s even a somewhat bigger change than just the simple thing about what the weapon is that’s being used. The other example I could draw on for that is in Afghanistan where we have seen a change in the manner in which inter-tribal disputes play out. Afghanistan has always had a historical feature of inter-tribal fighting. Well, these fightings, if you speak with Afghani people, were typically nothing more than killings of one or two individuals which would then subsequently be avenged on a case by case basis. I’ve done studies in the Jalalabad area where we’ve documented one tribal clash that took place over three weeks, and the primary weapon system used was stand-off artillery, 120mm. And so we had a very different pattern of death and injury with a large number of women and children killed who would normally never have been involved in tribal clashes because these always did tend to exempt women and children from these revenge killings. But now being killed because of the use of a different weapon technology. So I’ll leave my remarks there, but thank you for the talk.