

Glimmers of light in the darkness of conflict

Bill Frilay

So often, we are confronted with news of seemingly pointless and atrocious conflict. Over the last two years, there's been the Syrian civil war, and just within the last month, we have had the Nairobi shopping mall atrocity, and attacks on Christians in Pakistan and Nigeria. We have had the rise and seemingly fall of the euphemistically named Arab Spring. We have had continuing tensions on the Korean Peninsula.



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Well, it's nice not to be a Cassandra (or a Hanrahan) for a change, and note a few bits of good news — not necessarily world shattering, but at least offering some encouragement.

Act for Peace, the international aid agency of the National Council of Churches, has drawn our attention to a very recent UN resolution which commits the Security Council to addressing the illicit transfer, destabilising accumulation, and misuse of small arms and weapons, and establishes practical steps to strengthen the Council's response.¹ Act for Peace notes that this could be the start of a new era on international small arms control, noting in particular how the influx of small arms seems to have fuelled the conflict in places such as Syria.

Australia played a leading role in the resolution, introducing it at the Security Council, and presiding over the debate. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop was in the chair for this.

The second 'good news' item is that of the Syrian Government's agreement to give up chemical weapons. There has been little in the way of good news from either side in Syria these past two years, but this seemed something of a change of heart, in spite of huge pressure to do so by the Assad regime. Of course, the proof of the pudding will be confirmation that it has done so. We await the outcome.

Complementing this is the news that the body overseeing the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW, a UN-connected agency formed in 1997), has just been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The Nobel Institute made it clear that the decision was not just about Syria, but about the work of the OPCW, and the need to rid the globe of these terrible weapons. It hoped the award would give new impetus to an increased number of signatories to the Convention on Chemical Weapons and the elimination of such arsenals. I have to say that I had not heard of the OPCW until this. My first reaction was, why had not the brave and articulate Pakistani schoolgirl Malali been granted the award, but perhaps the quiet sustained work of an organisation doing good work warrants recognition also.

¹ [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2117\(2013\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2117(2013))

The third 'good news' item was the thawing of relations and agreement to talk between the US and Iran. On the one hand, we don't want to be too carried away with this – it could be described as the start of the beginning of the commencement of a thawing in relations; a bit like how Churchill described El Alamein in WWII. On the other hand, there has been a freeze in these relations since 1979, and the West in particular has been deeply concerned about Iran's nuclear intentions. In that regard, it is an important development, very much aided by Iran's change in presidency, and Obama's preparedness to meet.

So, a 'good news week' on the international front, and especially in the Middle East.

As it happens, this semester I am studying Eschatology – the theology of hope – at Yarra Theological Union under Redemptorist Fr Tony Kelly. As I write this, I keep thinking of eschatology, many books about which have 'hope' in the title, including Kelly's own *Eschatology and Hope*. A basic theme of current eschatology is that it is not just about 'end times' but about the Reign of God and God's grace in this world – through the overcoming of evil – as well as in the next. In the opening chapter of his book, Fr Kelly writes of the stirring of hope and the meaning of life:

It dares to suggest the possibility of a new truly human future in which past enmities can fall away and millions of the forgotten poor can come to share in the still abundant resources of the earth.

So I dare to hope that this little bit of good news gathers some momentum.



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UN adopts resolution on small arms and light weapons

The United Nations on 26 September 2013 adopted a landmark resolution to tackle the devastating impact of small arms and light weapons - a major breakthrough for arms control and the global push for peace!

Act for Peace is very proud to see Australia play a leading role in the resolution, introducing it at the Security Council and presiding over the debate.

The UN Security Council resolution on small arms and light weapons (SALW) is a major step forward in international co-operation on arms control and is the first time that the Security Council has ever adopted a resolution on this subject.

It could help prevent the flow of small arms to conflict-affected countries, including many in which Act for Peace works. It will have important implications for countries like Syria, where there is evidence the conflict is being fuelled by arms sourced from outside the country.

The resolution commits the Security Council to address the illicit transfer, destabilising accumulation and misuse of small arms and weapons, and establishes practical steps to strengthen the Council's response.

Australia was commended by numerous Council representatives for its leadership on the issue. This is not the first time we have played a leadership role in international disarmament. Australia recently led the successful negotiations for a UN Arms Trade Treaty to regulate the international arms trade. You can read more about the breakthrough in arms control on the Act for Peace website.

This landmark resolution, combined with the Arms Trade Treaty, could be the start of a new era of international co-operation around arms control.

