

Dear President Barack Obama,

Last month, you announced that in May the White House will host a convening with state and local elected officials from all 50 states to discuss their efforts to prevent gun violence through legislative and executive actions. Beyond the Administration's intention to determine what works on the ground, as of the time of this correspondence, no information regarding the invited attendees and agenda for the convening has been shared with the public. With the convening fast approaching, we write to convey points to consider when discussing potential solutions to tackle this growing epidemic.

With more than 7 million supporters, activists and volunteers in more than 150 countries, and complete independence from government, corporate or ideological interests, Amnesty International works to protect human rights worldwide. Our vision is of a world in which every person enjoys all of the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other internationally recognized human rights standards.

Gun violence in the United States is a human rights crisis, impacting the rights to life and security of person, equality under the law, freedom from discrimination, education, and freedom of movement, among others. Gun violence disproportionately affects communities of color, youth and women. For example, African Americans are disproportionately impacted by gun violence; firearm homicide is the leading cause of death for African Americans ages 1-44. African Americans account for 55% of gun homicide victims yet represent only 13.6% of the American population in 2010. Firearm injuries are the cause of death of eighteen children and young adults (24 years of age and under) each day in the U.S. Abused women are five times more likely to be killed by their abuser if the abuser owns a firearm.

Amnesty International is concerned that the patchwork of inconsistent and inadequate federal and state gun control laws, compounded by the failure to take all measures necessary to prevent gun violence, have left the U.S. government in breach of its human rights obligations. For example, an estimated 40% of all gun sales in the U.S. occur without a criminal background check. Only nine states and the District of Columbia require firearm owners to report the loss or theft of their firearms to law enforcement. And only half of the states currently mandate the surrender of firearms when a domestic violence protection order is issued.

As a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the U.S. government has clear and urgent obligations to protect the people living in this country from gun violence.

In April 2014, the UN Human Rights Committee, in a review of the U.S. government's compliance with the ICCPR, expressed concern about "the continuing high numbers of gun-related deaths and injuries and the disparate impact of gun violence on minorities, women and children." The Committee urged the U.S. government to "take all necessary measures to abide by its obligation to effectively protect the right to life. In particular, it should:

(a) Continue its efforts to effectively curb gun violence including through the continued pursuit of legislation requiring background checks for all private firearm transfers, in order to prevent possession of arms by persons recognized as prohibited individuals under federal law....”

Similarly, in August 2014, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in its review of the U.S. government’s compliance with the ICERD, expressed concern about the high number of gun-related deaths and injuries which disproportionately affect members of racial and ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans in the U.S., and urged the U.S. government to:

“[T]o take effective legislative and policy measures to fulfil its obligation to protect the right to life and to reduce gun violence, including by adopting legislation expanding background checks for all private firearm transfers and prohibiting the practice of carrying concealed handguns in public venues; increasing transparency concerning gun use in crime and illegal gun sales, including by repealing the Tiahrt Amendments...”

It’s important to recognize that the lack of sufficient action by the Federal Government to prevent gun violence has impacted the protection of human rights in the United States. In order to meet its obligations, the U.S. government must take action to prevent the violence that is putting so many rights in jeopardy.

We ask that you take into consideration the human rights implications of gun violence and create domestic mechanisms that will allow the U.S. to meet its human rights obligations, to prevent the loss of life, whether it be when a person is walking down the street, at school, or worshipping with their faith community. To ensure that human rights are at the center of the convening, we ask that a diverse group of constituents are invited, individuals who can speak to a wide range of drivers to violence, and who can bring a racial and economic justice lens to the discussion.

We would appreciate the opportunity to discuss additional recommendations with you or your staff. Please feel free to contact AIUSA Campaign Manager, Jamira Burley at 202-509-8160.