

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

ON THE

REVIEW OF FIREARM LICENSING IN ZAMBIA

BY THE

MINISTER OF HOME AFFAIRS AND INTERNAL SECURITY (MR MWIIMBU, SC)

Madam Speaker, let me thank you for giving me the opportunity to update the nation through this House on the review of firearms licensing in Zambia.

Madam Speaker, in the recent past, the country has witnessed an alarming rise in instances where firearms have been unlawfully discharged in public and private places. Sadly, in some cases, life has been lost. Rarely has a month gone by without the awful news of unlawful firearm discharge in a home, night club or other public places. Many communities, especially in high density areas and rural places, are ravaged almost daily by gun violence that does not make the news headlines. Some individuals have used firearms to take innocent lives in communities after being engaged as contract killers. As if that is not enough, some individuals have taken their own lives using firearms, either legally owned or acquired through other means.

Madam Speaker, these incidents are indelibly etched in our memories and have become toxic and taxing to our law enforcement officers. It is not just the law enforcement officers who should be worrying about guns being in the wrong hands, but every citizen, because everyone at the end of the day is a potential victim.

Madam Speaker, much as citizens are free to legally own firearms, as provided for by the law for security reasons and for licensed game hunting, it is regrettable that some people are abusing these weapons by taking human life. This is unacceptable and must be stopped forthwith.

Madam Speaker, we, as a nation, must act to stem this new tide of violence and the motivation that drives it. We cannot allow the unlawful use of firearms to become routine in our society. I am optimistic that we have the ability to end this tragic cycle of violence, but it will require us to come together in full urgency and honesty. Through rational firearm safety reforms that would make background checks more efficient and close loopholes, I am confident we can do just that.

Madam Speaker, let me start with a little history of the Firearms Act of 1970, Cap. 110 of the Laws of Zambia, which established a framework for legally prohibiting certain categories of people from possessing firearms. It is an Act to make new provision for regulating licenses and certificates and for the control of the import, export, movement, storage, possession, sale, manufacture and repair of firearms and ammunition; and to make provision for matters connected with or incidental to the foregoing.

Madam Speaker, from the time this law was enacted, a lot has changed. Zambia has changed and our firearms laws need to change with it. Unfortunately, no wholesome amendments have been made to the law to make it more comprehensively and effectively respond to new and emerging issues. Passing legislation to expand background checks to nearly every firearm sale, including those conducted through non-traditional platforms and private transfers, remains one of the top priorities for the New Dawn Administration firearm safety legislation to save lives. It is time to expand lifesaving background checks to every firearm sale in our country.

Madam Speaker, the recent shootings have shown the spotlight on our country and the strength of our firearms' legal regime. The number of civilian firearms legally registered in Zambia is estimated at around 38,572. The exact number of civilian-owned firearms is impossible to pinpoint because of a variety of factors, including arms that go unregistered, illegal trade and regional conflicts.

Madam Speaker, in response to growing concerns over the alarming rate of firearm ownership and related incidents, the Government through the Ministry of Home Affairs and Internal Security has commenced the review of the Firearms Act. The process has begun with internal review before it can be subjected to consultations with other stakeholders. The House is assured that utmost urgency has been attached to the review process.

Madam Speaker, I want to also assure the House that despite the unwanted developments observed, the Government is committed to maintaining law and order and will do everything within its means to ensure the safety of citizens. Any acts that endanger public safety will be dealt with appropriately.

Madam Speaker, over the years, Government has employed other initiatives aimed at strengthening arms control in the country. The General Firearms Amnesty, for instance, has seen the surrendering of over 6,500 arms for destruction by members of the public since its implementation commenced in 2011. We commend all members of the public who have positively responded to the firearms amnesty call and appeal to many more to surrender their firearms to the Zambia Police Service for appropriate action.

Madam Speaker, other initiatives employed to reinforce firearms control include:

- (a) enhanced community sensitisation on the safe use of firearms and their safe custody;
- (b) enhanced collaboration with local authorities in the issuance and renewal of firearm licences;
- (c) installation of surveillance cameras in hotspot areas to monitor criminal activities; and
- (d) displaying of visible signage indicating a strict no-firearms policy within certain premises.

Madam Speaker, I am aware that reviewing the law alone cannot completely solve the problem we are confronted with, but it will make a remarkable difference. There is no single answer, but we should be united in our willingness to do what we can to save lives.

Madam Speaker, as the Government, we will devote more resources to mental health priorities to identify people who may be about to cause harm to themselves or others. We shall confront this problem from multiple directions. We are not going to raise our hands in the air and give up, neither are we going to take sitting on the sidelines as an option when our citizens are being traumatised. We shall never surrender to the false logic that the problem is too big to address because that falls short of what the Zambian people deserve.

Madam Speaker, I thank you.
