



## Giffords in dramatic appeal for US gun control

By: Agence France-Presse – January 31, 2013

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Ex-lawmaker and shooting victim Gabrielle Giffords made a dramatic appeal to Congress Wednesday, January 30, telling lawmakers "you must act" to find ways to reduce the epidemic of US gun violence.

Democrat Giffords came face to face at a Senate hearing with leaders of the National Rifle Association, who reiterated their call for arming security forces at schools.

"Violence is a big problem. Too many children are dying," said Giffords, a former congresswoman who was shot in the head two years ago at a massacre in her Arizona district.

"We must do something. It will be hard, but the time is now," she told a hushed Senate Judiciary Committee hearing, speaking in the slow, labored voice that has marked her speech since her recovery.

"You must act," she pleaded, staring down the panel of senators. "Be bold, be courageous. Americans are counting on you."

Escorted into the room by her husband, retired astronaut Mark Kelly, Giffords was a surprise witness at the year's first congressional hearing on the causes of and possible solutions for gun violence.

It comes 6 weeks after a gunman killed 20 small children and six adults at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut.

The hearing pitted Giffords, who was to meet privately with President Barack Obama later Wednesday at the White House, against fellow witness Wayne LaPierre, the NRA's executive vice president and the gun lobby's leading voice.

"Proposing more gun control laws – while failing to enforce the thousands we already have – is not a serious solution to reducing crime," LaPierre said.

"Law-abiding gun owners will not accept blame for the acts of violent or deranged criminals," he added. "Nor do we believe the government should dictate what we can lawfully own and use to protect our families."

The Newtown massacre has prompted a national debate about gun rights, and led Obama to propose mandatory background checks for all gun purchases and the reinstatement of an assault weapons ban, among other measures.

Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer said he was drawing up legislation requiring background checks on all gun purchases and was "hopeful" that a bipartisan Senate bill could be introduced soon.

"It's a simple, straightforward solution," Schumer told the hearing, turning to LaPierre to urge that the NRA work with lawmakers to improve the background check system, a move most Americans support.

But LaPierre said the NRA now opposed universal background checks for gun owners, a reversal of an earlier position, saying the current system has failed because the administration does not aggressively prosecute violators.

The White House rejected the "logical fallacy" that the checks do not make a difference, with spokesman Jay Carney saying that LaPierre and the NRA would be in "a very distinct minority, if that's their position."

David Kopel, an analyst at the Cato Institute, said current federal gun control law has failed, and measures such as an assault weapons ban do not reduce crime. But he said there was room for cooperation on how to reduce the violence.

"Gun rights and gun control don't have to be culture war enemies," Kopel said.

Committee chairman Patrick Leahy, a gun-owning senator from Vermont where hunting is a way of life for many, urged lawmakers put aside Congress's normal partisanship and avoid "demagoguery" in debating common-sense reforms.

"We need to come together as Americans seeking common cause," Leahy said. "Americans are looking to us for solutions and for action."

In the wake of the Newtown shooting, Giffords and husband Kelly launched a group called Americans for Responsible Solutions aimed at curbing gun violence, and which some see as a lobbying bulwark against the NRA.

Kelly said he and Giffords were testifying not as victims, but as gun owners and as "two reasonable Americans who realize we have a problem with gun violence, and we need Congress to act."

He said he and Giffords would never give up their guns or their right to own them, "but rights demand responsibility."

"And this right does not extend to terrorists. It does not extend to criminals. It does not extend to the mentally ill."

While the committee ranking Republican Chuck Grassley urged lawmakers to look beyond guns to the root causes of violence, Schumer countered that it would be illogical to ignore the weapons at the heart of the matter.

"Not including guns when discussing mass killings is like not including cigarettes when discussing lung cancer," Schumer said. – Rappler.com