

"The Challenge of Controlling International Small Arms Transfers"

by
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Mr. Chairman,

It gives me great pleasure to share this platform in the distinguished company of Prime Minister Bondevik and President Konare. I wish to express my admiration to the President of the Norwegian Red Cross and the Secretary-General of Norwegian Church Aid for their choice of yet another cause worthy of their support. I am not surprised that working behind this important event is the innovative mind of Jan Egeland to whom I offer my best wishes for the success of the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Trade. I am delighted to learn that the UNDP is closely involved in organizing this conference and I extend my appreciation to Mr. Tore Rose.

Mr. Chairman,

At the very outset, I want to express support for the proposed Moratorium on Small Arms for West Africa. It takes more than courage to conceive, put together and commit to a course of action which would be the first of its kind in the world. I feel assured that history will view this as a path finding step in a global search for effective sub-regional measures to prevent and reduce the incidence of violence and criminality resulting from excessive accumulation, transfer and use of small arms and light weapons. There cannot be a more reassuring guarantee to control the arms trade than through voluntarily assumed commitments by affected governments to ban their import, export and manufacture. A sub-regional moratorium in West Africa might well become a test case in assessing the real problems and implications of controlling transfers of small arms at the field level.

It is a matter of gratification for me to recall that the staff of the former Centre for Disarmament Affairs was closely associated with the developments throughout the period 1993 to 1997 described by President Konare today. This is the second time in just two years that Mali has shown a way to do it differently. The extraordinary spectacle when, on 27 March 1996, Mali made a bonfire of nearly 3,000 small weapons to light a flame of peace has become a symbol. To you, President Konare, I extend my greetings on the second anniversary of the lighting of the flame of peace.

Mr. Chairman,

My tribute to the statesmanship of the leading figures in West Africa and to ECOWAS is enhanced as we acknowledge the size of the daunting challenge that faces the world. The damage and destruction caused by the recent use of small arms is out of proportion to their size. Killings on a massive scale have resulted from the use of weapons so ordinary that they were rarely seen as instruments of large scale violence in modern times. Intra-state armed conflicts fought with small arms have claimed more lives in the last five years than those lost due to natural disasters like cyclones, earthquakes, volcanoes, landslides and wildfires combined.

Available in abundance, cheap to buy, requiring little training to use, small arms have become the weapons of choice for the present day conflicts fought mostly in the streets and back lanes by irregular troops in violation of accepted standards of humanitarian law. Over 90% of the victims of the use of small arms are civilians with women and children accounting for 80% of the casualties.

In virtually all the armed conflicts currently dealt with by the United Nations, small arms and light weapons are the primary or sole tools of violence. And with few exceptions, none of the countries where these weapons were used in recent armed conflicts actually manufacture them. In many cases, neither the manufacturer, nor the exporter, nor even the buyer really knows the purposes for which the weapons will be ultimately used because unlike the trade in any other category of weapons, nearly 40% of the trade in small arms is carried out through illicit means. Although it may be difficult to quantify, an estimated three billion dollars worth of small arms cross national frontiers each year representing the equivalent of roughly one-eighth of all

international sales in conventional weapons.

In a pioneer work undertaken by the Panel of Governmental Experts appointed by the Secretary-General to assist him in preparing his first ever report on "Small Arms" last year, it is pointed out that the small arms in circulation today have been accumulated over years of procurement through regular and irregular channels of supply. Included in this accumulation are massive quantities of weapons and ammunition supplied during the Cold War in the Horn of Africa, Southern, East and West Africa, South East and South West Asia, and Central America.

As a fall-out of earlier procurements, an estimated 2 million small arms and light weapons are still circulating in Central America, 7 million in West Africa and an estimated 10 million in Afghanistan. Through circuitous routes, and after changing many hands, sometimes in collusion with traders in other contraband goods, several of these weapons have been used in places far removed from their original places of regular supply. In stuff reminiscent of fiction, illicit international transfers of small arms are believed to involve multi-party deals involving false documentation, concealment, smuggling and coded bank accounts.

Small arms are also transferred within a country, through theft from government arsenals, capture from the government or from sub-national groups, transfer between sub-national groups, armed deserters and demobilized soldiers and acquisition from criminals or drug-traffickers.

As of now, it may seem that even a rough estimate of the real size of the challenge could amount to a step forward. This is important because within the broad category of small arms could fall anything from shoulder fired missiles to machetes, not to mention home-made weapons capable of inflicting severe damage on civilians caught in crossfire between irregular fighting groups.

Thanks to the meticulous rigor of research institutes and concerned scholars compiling such statistics, it is possible to get some idea of the magnitude of the challenge in sheer numbers. I, for one, am intrigued by its implications when I read that small arms and light weapons are being currently manufactured in over 70 countries which is almost twice as many as the manufacturers of other categories of weapons. Depending upon their metric calibre, there are at least 20 known types of pistols available in close to 200 models, which means that 400 varieties are being manufactured. Over 40 models of rifles are being manufactured to at least one dozen specifications, the better known AK-47 being just one of the 500 known varieties.

Mr. Chairman,

The critical choice facing us today is not whether we can face this challenge, but how? I firmly believe that the enormity of this challenge will be met by policy responses to the ground swell of civil society groups committed to overcome it as much in the affected countries subjected to the violence and dislocation as by others moved by their plight. It will be met by national initiatives for sub-regional arrangements to stem cross-boundary movements of

contraband goods, including illicit arms transfers. It will be met by inter-governmental conventions to establish accountability of weapons manufactured to military specifications. It will be met by non-governmental organizations sharing the objectives of the United Nations as it continues to be the focal point for global efforts to move into the next millennium with better and more effective means to save the coming generations from the scourge of unprecedented damage and destruction unleashed by small arms and light weapons during the closing decade of this century.

Mr. Chairman,

We at the United Nations are gratified that there is so much political energy to act worldwide. It is important to channel these energies into some attainable priority goals. Control of illicit arms transfers should become a priority goal for which initiatives like the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers provide an early starter. Conventions like the one signed by the OAS should pave the way for similar other regional arrangements. Also helpful will be codes of conduct for international arms transfers which are now being considered in more than one forum.

Let me assure you that the Secretary-General is personally committed to raising public awareness of the direct and indirect consequences of the illegitimate use of small arms and of the illicit arms trade. Among the new tasks he has assigned to the re-established Department of Disarmament Affairs is that of effectively fulfilling the mandates given to the Secretariat in the area of small arms and light weapons. He recognizes that this will entail the challenge of working with diverse quarters keen on controlling the illegal trade in small arms. In his latest statement on the subject, made in Geneva on 17 March, during the occasion of the release of a book entitled "A Peace of Timbuktu", the Secretary-General upheld the Malian experience as an example of the virtues of close coordination within the UN system and expressed his strong support for sub-regional moratoria on small arms.

Since assuming office as Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs in February this year, hardly a day has gone by when I have not been approached by a public interest group, a committed non-governmental organization, a sub-regional or regional body or an inter-governmental assembly willing to lend its weight and support in meeting the challenge facing us. I will earnestly endeavour to ensure that the United Nations retains its outreach, acts as a catalyst for concerted action and develops a coherent strategy to channel various initiatives towards the early achievement of shared objectives. My statement here is but one indication of the importance I attach to this area of my responsibilities. In carrying it out, I have closely followed the wealth of ideas emerging from different sources.

In my personal view, one of our first priorities would appear to be the elaboration of practical proposals of specific concern to particular regions. We must focus on initiatives which could be matched by financial commitments and implemented at the field level with real-time, tangible results for the civilians whose lives are immediately and most affected by the increased

incidence of violence, criminality, delinquency, and anti-social activities aggravated by easy availability of weapons freely acquired in illicit transfers.

To attain the best results, it is imperative that the United Nations sustains and broadens the gathering momentum for action. Not unlike the proposed moratorium in West Africa, we will have to test our ideas in the field and determine whether progress in one region can be used as positive momentum for preventing the spread of small arms transfers in another region or in reducing their incidence.

Mr. Chairman,

As I conclude here, I wish to reiterate that the United Nations' activities in the field of small arms are broad-based, practical and results-oriented. We feel that the Organization is well-positioned to provide governments, regional bodies and collaborative networks such as the Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers with coordinating and norm-setting strategies to facilitate their efforts to monitor and control the transfer of small arms. As the international community's central multilateral forum and as its pre-eminent organization with offices and programmes worldwide, the United Nations, together with these partners, is prepared to meet the challenge of controlling the transfer of small arms. We must spare no effort in working together to ensure that when history looks back on our endeavours, it will recognize that although it amounted to a daunting challenge, the trade of small arms was met successfully in the interests of international peace and security.

I thank you for your attention, ladies and gentleman.