

"The Phenomenon of Small Arms and Light Weapons from an International Perspective"

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Ad Hoc Meeting on Small Arms and Light Weapons from an International Perspective

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Mr. Chairman,

Allow me to extend my warmest gratitude to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace for having convened this important and timely gathering. I wish to pay you a tribute for the initiative you have taken in addressing the phenomenon of small arms and light weapons, and for your willingness to play a more active role. In the discussions later today and tomorrow, ideas will be exchanged on more specific considerations which the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace may wish to keep in mind as it looks for an entry point in the gathering momentum for urgent action to prevent and reduce the death and destruction caused by small arms.

For the next few minutes, however, I would like to share with you some thoughts on the phenomenon of small arms and light weapons as we see it from the perspective of the United

Nations.

Let me begin with a matter of terminology. The Secretary-General's Report on Small Arms, prepared in 1997 with the assistance of the Panel of Governmental Experts, uses the term "small arms and light weapons". Concentrating its attention on those weapons which were manufactured to military specifications, the report defines "small arms" as weapons designed for personal use, such as sub machine-guns and assault rifles. In the same report, "light weapons" are defined as those designed for use by a small crew or on a light vehicle. Rocket propelled grenades, light anti tank missiles, and shoulder fired anti air-craft missiles fall into this category.

When I talk about small arms today, I use the term generically as I wish to include all tools of violence actually used in killings which are totally out of proportion to the size or the sophistication of the weapon. I do so because in my considered view, we should be clear about the objectives we wish to attain through our efforts to control, reduce and prevent excessive accumulation and proliferation of small arms. Paramount among those objectives is to stop the recurrent incidence of appalling violence resulting from the recurrent use, in the last decade, of a category of weapons which have existed in some form or another since the advent of humanity.

Mr. Chairman,

Small arms have been or are the primary or sole tools of violence in most of the recent armed conflicts dealt with by the United Nations where fighting involves irregular troops. In terms of the violence witnessed, these armed conflicts broadly fall into three categories. Extremely violent conflicts of very short duration have taken the maximum human toll as in Rwanda, where nearly half a million lives were lost in a matter of few weeks. Occasional spurts of violence have cumulatively inflicted heavy casualties in protracted conflicts lasting anywhere between 5 to 35 years as in Angola, Bosnia, Cambodia, El Salvador, Chechnya, Georgia, Guatemala, Liberia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka. In places like Somalia, smouldering incidence of violence has transformed situations of essentially humanitarian nature into armed conflicts.

Small arms by themselves have not caused the conflicts in which they are being used. But they contribute towards exacerbating these conflicts. Since they are easily available and require very little maintenance, they can be used for long periods and thus affect the duration of violence. Their abundant supplies, cheap costs, and low training requirement encourages their use for militant rather than peaceful resolution of unsettled differences. Their recurrent use generates a vicious circle of a greater sense of insecurity leading to more widespread demand and use of such weapons.

It is by now very well known that a vast majority of recent victims of violence are civilians, with women and children accounting for over 80% of casualties. Additionally, for every one person killed in most of the recent conflicts, more than ten were either internally displaced or fled to neighbouring countries, some of whom already face tense situations of internal unrest. In some situations, anywhere between 1 million to 4 million people were uprooted as a result of

recent conflicts fought mostly with small arms amid the streets and back lanes of towns and villages inhabited largely by civilians. Among the millions of displaced persons in need of international relief and assistance are those uprooted by such conflicts in Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Haiti, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan.

A particularly disturbing feature of current conflicts is the increased participation of children. Well over a quarter of a million children between the ages of 12 to 18 are estimated to have fought with small arms in 25 countries. In some parts of the world, entire generations of children are known to have emerged from protracted and unresolved civil strife with one commodity to sell: a cheap and lethal weapon owned by them or their family. Many of them have only one skill: how to use that weapon. For some of them fear and intimidation is not a feeling: it is a language. I sometimes shudder to think that unless they are given re-training and re-orientation, it is from this generation of children born and raised in recurrent violence that we will see the emergence of some of the leaders of tomorrow, entrusted with momentous decisions affecting peace and security in their immediate regions and beyond. These children are the victims of violence even as they perpetrate it in part because they can easily get hold of small arms which require little skill to use them.

Among the worst affected victims of recent conflicts fought with small arms are some of the poorest countries of the world. Each new incidence of violence subjects them to a three-fold jeopardy: immediate death and displacement; loss of productive capacity to swiftly rebuild what was destroyed; and vulnerability to another cycle of violence. Particularly vulnerable are multi-ethnic societies with some history of inter-group tension. Random acts of violence assume ethnic, sectarian and communal dimensions with the most rudimentary of weapons causing severe casualties.

Mr. Chairman,

Once we accept that overcoming the threat of recurrent violence is a paramount objective, then it stands to reason that our efforts to prevent and reduce the incidence of violence should address both ends of the spectrum, i.e. small arms as the primary tools of violence and the cause of violence itself. A key element in deterring the use of the tool is to put together a set of incentives and disincentives. The incentives could take the form of speedy re-integration of former combatants into civil society through assured avenues of gainful employment in fragile economies emerging from armed conflicts. The disincentives might well cover an entire range of measures designed to reduce the easy availability of small arms to groups likely to put them to violent uses. Both the incentives and disincentives would be remarkably stronger when accompanied by a strong ethical appeal to eschew violence as a means of resolving ethnic, communal and sectarian differences.

Mr. Chairman,

I firmly believe that the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace is eminently equipped to

play a more active role in invoking widespread support to bring about restraints the use of small arms as the tools of violence. I am convinced that it is uniquely placed to send out a message for greater tolerance to societies engaged in civil strife over ethnic, communal and sectarian animosities.

At the United Nations, the Secretary-General is committed to do more to halt the excessive accumulation, proliferation and use of small arms. As an important part of his program of reform, the Secretary-General has re-established the Department of Disarmament Affairs to underline the importance of disarmament as a central issue on the global agenda. The Secretary-General believes that the Department's broad agenda will include closer work with governments devoting their attention to practical measures for addressing the direct and indirect consequences of illegitimate use and illicit trade of small arms. The Department has recently started to assist governments interested in making available some additional resources to respond to requests from countries seeking help in the collection and destruction of weapons after the cessation of armed conflicts. We regard this work as a welcome addition to our other responsibilities.

Mr. Chairman.

We in the Secretariat see this phenomenon of small arms as spanning across a broad spectrum of inter-related, cross-sectoral problems with which the United Nations is dealing in the post-Cold War period. The UN peace keepers in "Blue Helmets" witness first-hand the debilitating impact of small arms in their daily conduct of duty. The UN staff working in fields of economic and social development and reconstruction and humanitarian affairs, such as those in the United Nations Children's Fund, the UN Development Programme, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the UN International Drug Control Programme, are also confronted with the consequences of uncontrolled availability and use of small arms. Crime and violence arising from the availability of small arms has made it more difficult to conduct development projects and programmes which address the root causes of conflict. This in turn has been a factor in the decline of economic assistance and investment from donors. A commonly shared dimension of the phenomenon among more affected regions of the world is a growing link between the availability of weapons, drugs, contraband trafficking, and level of violence.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me briefly turn to ways in which the international community is addressing the challenge of small arms. Our major legislative mandate in this area at the United Nations is the follow-up to the Secretary-General's Report on Small Arms and its recommendations. In addition, we are engaged in several other activities emanating from our daily discharge of assigned duties. Let me mention just a few.

The Secretary-General wants us to step up our activities to assume a role of advocacy and extend our outreach to various constituencies likely to make an impact on building societal

resistance to violence resulting from the illegitimate use and illicit trade of small arms.

Member States seek our assistance and advice in planning and organizing events aimed at building consensus on specific proposals for regional and sub-regional action.

The Department of Disarmament Affairs maintains a user friendly information facility to act as a catalyst in bringing together like-minded non-governmental organizations to coalesce and coordinate their efforts.

One of my immediate concerns, after assuming office as the Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament, is to assist the Secretary-General in ensuring that the ground swell of public support for effective measures to address the phenomenon of small arms is channeled into some attainable objectives. I believe that we will succeed in making faster progress in that direction by expanding our outreach, by continuing to act as catalysts for concerted action and by developing a coherent strategy to harness initiatives from diverse quarters towards the early achievement of shared objectives. In carrying out this responsibility, we will closely follow the wealth of ideas emerging from different sources.

Mr. Chairman,

The leadership of the Secretary-General and the mandates entrusted to the United Nations, particularly the Department of Disarmament Affairs, have a wide-ranging scope for action at the international level. Any broad-based efforts to meet the challenge of small arms, however, would not be comprehensive without the participation and initiatives of regional organizations, national governments and representatives of civil society. At the regional level, notable work is being carried out by organizations such as the European Union, the Council of Europe, the Organization of American States, the Organization of African Unity and the Economic Community of West African States. There are also dynamic non-governmental organizations which are elaborating concrete, practical proposals.

Each one of these initiatives to address the small arms phenomenon has its appeal at the international, regional, sub-regional and national level. All of them will have a greater chance of success when they receive widespread support from the involvement of civil society. To me, it seems that the involvement of civil society pre-determines that we give high priority to those practical proposals which are of specific concern to particular regions. I say this with an awareness that as serious as it is, the phenomenon affects different parts of the world with varying degrees of severity. Certain countries, for instance, might be more keen to promote regional or sub-regional moratoriums on the transfer of small arms, while others would possibly wish to undertake speedy collection and destruction of all such weapons which are not under legal civilian possession and which are not required for the purposes of national defense and internal security. Even a sharing of national experiences may become a way of avoiding the mistakes, and building upon the successes, of earlier attempts.

A global consensus is of the utmost importance in encouraging result oriented measures suited to the specific requirements of the severely affected sub-regions. It is in building this global consensus that prestigious and dynamic actors of the stature of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace could play a more active role. Its tradition of support and generosity towards those in need is well known. I know that those calling for its help are numerous. Among them now, I will say, are the victims of small arms used with deadly results in recurrent conflicts and violence within societies. As we undertake the task of assisting in ascertaining the needs of countries on the question of small arms, and attempt to match those needs with appropriate resources, it is but natural that we look towards those with a tradition to support worthy causes. I believe that we can not do better than to launch here our efforts to generate support for projects which have a genuine impact on those people whose lives are hanging between the threat of violence resulting from the likely use of small arms and the aftermath of destruction already caused by their violent use.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman and distinguished experts.