

**Statement by Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs
Jayantha Dhanapala
at
The Small Arms Information Session
25 September 1998, 9:10 a.m.
ECOSOC Chamber**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I wish to congratulate His Excellency Mr. Lloyd Axworthy, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada and His Excellency Mr. Knut Vollenbaek, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway, for their joint initiative in organizing this special information session on small arms and light weapons proliferation. I am delighted that they chose the UN headquarters to gather further support for the well considered elements of common understanding in the Oslo Platform. We meet in the afterglow of the fortieth ratification of the Ottawa Convention on landmines to which both Canada and Norway made important contributions. This high profile event today adds a sense of greater urgency for prompt and effective global action to stem the flow and use of small arms as primary instruments of violence and armed conflicts. It also puts more energy into the already evident, and significant, political momentum which must be sustained and channeled into the attainment of some clearly understood and widely shared objectives.

In defining those objectives, the Secretary-General has spoken emphatically in his latest report on Africa to the Security Council (and I quote):

“For the United Nations, there is no higher goal, no deeper commitment and no greater ambition than preventing armed conflict.”

We know that armed conflicts are regrettably a part of the human landscape rather than aberrations of history. And yet, most of the present day conflicts are somewhat unique. One characteristic of this uniqueness lies in an interface between crime, violence, adversarial politics and irregular warfare as a mode of combat for mostly internal conflicts. The abundant and ready supply of easy to use tools of conflict is another characteristic. A still more telling characteristic is the relative absence of legitimate state control over the tools used in most of current conflicts and over the purposes for which these conflicts are fought.

In his kind invitation to me to address this session, Foreign Minister Axworthy has asked for my views on practical steps we may need to take together to successfully resolve the complex problem before us. Let me briefly mention a few.

- It seems to me that the steps we consider to stem the flow and use of small arms will be meaningful only in relation to the uniqueness of current conflicts and

the realities of the arms trade. Let's not forget that well over 100 member states of the UN do not manufacture weapons domestically and rely upon imports to meet their legitimate national security concerns, including those for maintenance of law and order.

- Looking at the variety of initiatives underway to address the issue of small arms in all its aspects and dimensions, I believe it will be necessary to focus our combined political energies on a few priority areas for immediate action in designing urgent measures suited to specific situations. We cannot afford to wait longer for all embracing agreements covering the broader dimensions of all the issues raised by the recurring incidence of violence and conflicts resulting from the proliferation and use of small arms and light weapons. I also believe that to postpone action now may be a double disadvantage. It will detract from the urgency of facing the big challenge posed by small arms. It may also run the risk of losing the support of a powerful political momentum that exists now.

- It seems to me that restoring and strengthening legitimate state control over tools of violence is a task for which there is already a growing global consensus. This consensus is calling out for prompt international response to the phenomenon of trans-boundary linkages between organized crime, illicit arms trade, drug deals and acts of terrorism. This phenomenon cannot be ignored without closing our eyes to the sad fact that, in several parts of the world, it is claiming the energies and time

of a very valuable human resource i.e. the youth of the countries affected by recurring violence, crime and conflicts.

After it took the lead in placing the issue of small arms on the global agenda, the United Nations has become a central forum for generating better public understanding of the direct and indirect consequences of the use of small arms. It will continue to act as a catalyst in the search for the most effective steps, to be a clearing house for information, to facilitate an exchange of national experiences and to be the global forum for arriving at agreements and arrangements most suited to the specific situations faced by member states severely affected by the excessive proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The Secretary-General has established a mechanism to coordinate all action on small arms (CASA) within the UN system whether it emanates from humanitarian, developmental, international criminal justice or security concerns. This is an in-house mechanism to avoid overlap and duplication of effort as well as to promote a coherent response to a multi-faceted problem.

The Secretariat is ready to provide assistance to member states in designing global and regional steps which could help governments to foresee and forestall the consequences of arms deals over which they have no control. The Secretariat is also

ready to put together a profile of the magnitude and scope of the illicit arms trade in which neither the manufacturer nor the seller nor the dealer, and sometimes not even the buyer, has control over the use to which the weapons they handle will be put. In responding to requests for assistance by member states directly affected by the use of illicitly procured weapons, the Secretariat has accumulated experiences which can be fully adapted to specific situations.

I look forward to the successful development of the Oslo platform in its contribution to the global momentum for prompt action on the problems posed by the proliferation of small arms to international peace and security.