

Opening statement by

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United Nations

to be delivered by

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on the occasion of the opening of the

Workshop on

**Illicit Trafficking in Small Arms: Latin America and Caribbean Issues**

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Mr. Vice-Foreign Minister, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first thank the Government of Peru for its support of this Workshop. We appreciate your interest and the efforts you have made in order for us to be here today. I welcome you, representatives of the countries of the region, and the representatives of international and regional organizations. This Workshop will not only serve as a forum at which we may exchange valuable and necessary first-hand information on the subject of illicit arms traffic, but will also constitute the perfect framework in which to launch, encourage and support the work of the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean. In this regard, I would like to thank again the Government of Peru for its support of the Centre, as well as all those governments which have pledged similar support.

The Department of Disarmament Affairs is pleased that the General Assembly has decided to revitalize the Lima Regional Centre. We are delighted for two reasons: it shows the commitment of the international community -- especially of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean-- to the cause of peace, disarmament and development. It also constitutes a valuable tool for the United Nations in its quest for peace. This region was a pioneer in the establishment of nuclear-weapon-free zones through the Treaty of Tlatelolco. It can be the source of further initiatives in the area of disarmament with the UN as a partner.

The mandate of the Regional Centre is wide enough to include many, if not all of the concerns, interests and needs of the region. It is up to Member States, civil society, non-governmental organizations, scholars and interested individuals, to help in the creation of a dynamic and active Centre. I assure you that the UN will do its part.

Among all security concerns, we know that the issue of small arms is of particular interest to your region. Latin America and the Caribbean has become one of the leading regions in the world in its efforts to combat the excessive accumulation of small arms and the effects of their proliferation. I cite for example the OAS "Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacturing and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials" and the "Joint Mechanism for the Registration of Recipients and Suppliers of Fire Arms, Ammunition, Explosives and other Related Materials" adopted by the Mercosur Member States, and the associated countries Bolivia and Chile, as clear and encouraging steps in the right direction. I know that many of your governments and organizations, like Caricom, are also pursuing efforts in this field. The Department of Disarmament Affairs stands ready to assist you whenever and wherever possible and to work with you to make these commitments and hopes a reality. The newly reestablished activities of the Regional Centre is in the perfect position to play an active role in this area.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a relatively short period of time, perhaps less than five years, a number of issues that were previously mostly on the margins of international attention have become central to the global agenda for the

prevention and resolution of conflicts. Among these issues, few others have evoked such widespread and rapidly growing interest as that of controlling the excessive accumulation, proliferation and use of small arms and light weapons. The Secretary-General of the United Nations has expressed his personal interest in combating this plague, which affects the daily lives of millions of people and consumes not only a great part of the international community's resources, but also puts at risk its most important investment in the future - its children.

As we all know, small arms have been and continue to be the primary tools of violence in most of the recent armed conflicts around the world. Small arms by themselves do not cause the conflicts in which they are being used, but they exacerbate 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 supply, cheap cost, and low training requirement encourage a militant rather than peaceful resolution of unsettled differences. Their recurrent use generates a greater sense of insecurity leading, in a vicious circle, to more widespread demand and use of such weapons.

While in some other regions of the world small arms and light weapons are of concern because they are being used in open conflicts, the problem posed by small arms in the Americas is slightly different. During the Cold War period, large numbers of such weapons were supplied by one side or the other. These weapons are still in circulation in spite of the encouraging results from several arms collection and destruction programmes, most of which have been undertaken at the initiative of civil society. As a result of post-conflict peace-building processes, the region has been increasingly able to build democratic institutions and to further economic and social development. There is still, however, a major problem that has to be tackled: the phenomenon of illicit trafficking. For instance, from the point of geography, Central America is a major transit area for drugs and weapons trafficking between North and South America, and to the rest of the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my view that we must address the issue of arms and violence in a comprehensive manner. Whether used in terrorist acts or by petty criminals or by kidnappers, such weapons are not, by definition, in legal possession, and the chances are that they have not been legally obtained.

The issue of illicit traffic in small arms is therefore a central one in the disarmament agenda. As you may be aware, the UN General Assembly, by its resolution 53/77 E on "Small Arms", has decided to convene an international conference on illicit arms trade in all its aspects no later than the year 2001. The United Nations is currently fully immersed in its preparation, formulating the agenda and ensuring that the political momentum generated keeps building.

There is a broad consensus among Member States that the illicit aspect of small arms is posing a threat to international peace and development. The General Assembly has requested, in fact, that the UN learn more about this issue, and to that end, it adopted another resolution (53/77 T) on "Illicit Traffic in Small Arms", requesting the Secretary-General to hold broad-based consultations on:

- (a) The magnitude and scope of the phenomenon of illicit trafficking in small arms;
- (b) Possible measures to combat illicit trafficking in and illicit circulation of small arms, including those suited to indigenous regional approaches;
- (c) The role of the United Nations in collecting, collating, sharing and disseminating information on illicit trafficking in small arms;

We are here to listen and to learn about your experiences and your expectations. We are aware that the Americas region is rich and diverse and that national or sub-regional needs and perceptions vary greatly, reflecting the uniqueness of each area of the continent. The holding of this Workshop signifies global acknowledgment of the need to promote an exchange of information on the whole range of experiences in illicit arms trafficking.

You are the representatives of the foreign ministries, the police forces, the customs services, the intelligence agencies and civil society; you are here representing the players who will have to take concrete actions and those whose security will be enhanced by these actions. Exchanging information will not only benefit you, but also the United Nations and thus the international community. Transparency is the condition sine-qua-non for taking concrete steps, and the international community is ready to take them.

I wish you success in your deliberations.

Thank you.