

20 September 1999

PRESS BRIEFING BY UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR DISARMAMENT AFFAIRS

As 650,000 weapons stolen from arms depots during Albania's 1997 civil disorder had become a threat to its fledgling democracy and law and order, the President of Albania had requested of the Secretary-General in 1998 that the United Nations undertake a weapons collection programme, Jayantha Dhanapala, Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, said this afternoon at a press briefing at Headquarters.

A mission consisting of members of the Department of Disarmament Affairs (DDA), the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) had undertaken an evaluation, which had recommended that the United Nations, through the UNDP, undertake a weapons collection programme, using community-based development projects as an incentive. A pilot programme in the District of Gramsh in the centre of Albania, which had a high concentration of stolen weapons, had then been established, he said. Although the Kosovo crisis had severely impacted the pilot programme, the Government of Albania had reaffirmed its commitment to the project after the crisis and had cooperated with the UNDP to implement it.

During his visit, from 16 to 18 September, Mr. Dhanapala -- invited by the President of Albania to evaluate the project -- had spoken with the President, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Local Government who was Chairman of the National Steering Committee, about the prospects for an expansion of the programme. He had also attended a ceremony in Gramsh in which weapons had been symbolically destroyed and the Town Lighting Project had been inaugurated, and he had helped in the inauguration of a road that would connect several communities in the area. He said the fact that the President of Albania had also been present at the ceremony, attended by some 1,000 people, illustrated the Government's commitment to this project of "Weapons for Development".

It was remarkable, Mr. Dhanapala continued, that the project had been concluded within 15 months, despite interruption by the Kosovo crisis. As a result, 5,770 weapons -- mostly rifles -- had been collected, plus 100,000 tons of ammunition, ranging from magazines for small arms to rocket-propelled grenades. The development projects consisted of road and bridge construction, a telecommunications project, the aforementioned urban lighting project and the refurbishing of a post office. Contributors to this project were Italy, Andorra, Belgium, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Japan and Norway.

With regards to the concept of "Weapons for Development" credibility had been established, he said, and the success of the project in Gramsh provided a basis for expanding to other parts of Albania. Together with the local pilot project, a national public awareness campaign had been executed, and the UNDP development projects had run concurrently with a government law and order and amnesty programme.

For the next stage, plans for expansion of the programme to the districts in the immediate vicinity of Gramsh had been drawn up by Jan Wahlberg, the UNDP resident representative in Tirana. Based on the success of the Gramsh pilot project, Mr. Dhanapala appealed to the international community to make this disarmament project a priority. "It is a project that would help to de-weaponize Albanian society and strengthen its democratic institutions and law and order", he said. He expressed the hope that the project would serve as a model for the rest of the world as far as the direct relationship between disarmament and development was concerned.

Answering a correspondent's question, Mr. Dhanapala said that they had determined that the bulk of the collected weapons had indeed come from the raided arms depots and that none could be traced back to other countries. He explained, in response to another question, that during the Kosovo conflict, the strain put on the infrastructure had been so great that every level of the Government had had to focus on that situation, which had led to a temporary suspension of the weapons collection programme.

Regarding the question of finances, he said the programme so far had cost a little over a million dollars, and the expansion to the other district would cost an estimated three to four million dollars.

* * * * *