

Washington Convocation of the Eminent Persons Group

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Statement by the Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs

Mr. Jayantha Dhanapala

Distinguished Members of the Eminent Persons Group,

We are all aware of the severe negative impact of small arms proliferation on human security. In this regard, the Eminent Persons Group is a very welcome initiative as an independent voice outside the UN. You have the individual and collective experience, and the influence to raise the profile of this issue on the international peace and security agenda.

In recent years, many leaders like yourselves, experts, and citizens of all nationalities have become increasingly aware of the price that humanity is paying for the excessive and destabilizing accumulation of small arms and light weapons. The effects of the unlawful and uncontrolled use of these arms have been utterly catastrophic by virtually any index. They have over the years threatened or taken the lives of literally millions – including large numbers of innocent civilians, women and children prominent among them. They have retarded the peaceful economic and political development of entire nations and eroded the authority of governments. In this light, the proliferation of small arms must be recognized for what it is: a security issue; a human rights issue; a development issue – it is all of the above and it quite rightfully demands immediate attention.

Many initiatives have already been proposed and many excellent speeches have been made to address this deadly cluster of issues. Yet, as the Secretary-General states in his Millennium Report, *“The many recent expressions of concern about small arms proliferation are a welcome sign that the importance of the issue is being recognized, but words alone do nothing to prevent the ongoing slaughter of innocent people. Dialogue is critical, but we must match the rhetoric of concern with the substance of practical action”*.

The United Nations has been at the forefront of international efforts to stop the proliferation of small arms. Over the last few years, the General Assembly has adopted several resolutions dealing with small arms. The Economic and Social Council of the UN (ECOSOC) has initiated a negotiating process leading towards a protocol combating the illicit manufacture of and trafficking in firearms as part of the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. The Security Council, in turn, has considered small arms in the context of a variety of resolutions and statements. These range from the prevention of armed conflicts, to the protection of civilians in armed conflict, to children and armed conflict, and to the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants in a peacekeeping environment.

Small arms and light weapons escape the traditional boundaries of “arms control”. New efforts are needed to channel the growing international concern towards the realization of some realistic and attainable goals. These efforts must also focus on strengthening the UN’s ability to respond speedily and effectively to requests for assistance by sub-regions and countries severely affected by the excessive accumulation, proliferation, illicit trafficking, and use of small arms. In response to such needs, the Secretary-General has designated DDA as the focal point for small arms within the UN system. DDA, in turn, has set up the Coordinating Action on Small Arms (CASA^[i]) mechanism, as an instrument for consultation, information exchange, and priority setting among Departments and Agencies concerned with the multiple dimensions of the small arms issue.

Let me now turn your attention to a relatively new political initiative which has enjoyed consensus in the General Assembly since it first appeared on its agenda in 1996, the so-called “practical disarmament measures”. These are aimed at providing political and financial support to United Nations member states that face concrete problems arising out of post-conflict situations. These include, for example, the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants into civil society; weapons collection programmes; exchange of information, etc.

As a result of the resolutions on the “Consolidation of peace through practical disarmament measures”, an open-ended Group of Interested Member States was established. The Group, chaired by Germany, meets periodically to examine, and wherever possible support, projects of

practical disarmament designed and initiated by affected countries.

The Group has supported the organization of a “training for trainers” seminar in Yaounde, on demobilization, disarmament and reintegration of former combatants, and a sub-regional workshop in Guatemala, on national experiences in weapons collection, demobilisation and integration of former combatants in Central America.

The Group has also provided political and financial support to the Gramsh Pilot Project (GPP), a weapons collection programme in Albania. The GPP is a disarmament initiative with development incentives, conceived by DDA and administered by UNDP. It encourages the voluntary surrender of weapons by offering labour-intensive, income-generating community development activities in exchange for weapons. It comprises three aspects: disarmament, development, and advocacy and public awareness.

The success of the GPP has demonstrated that local communities can take charge of their own future. They have understood that, with the assistance of the United Nations and the international community, they have the power to find solutions to the problems posed by small arms.

Distinguished Members of the Group,

The preparations are well under way for the 2001 UN Conference on the Illicit Trafficking on Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects. The Conference will provide us all with the opportunity to address the root causes of the problem and to take action against most of today’s tools of violence. As the Conference will focus on the “illicit” aspect of the small arms trade, member states must recognize that many illegal weapons in circulation at one point were transferred by governments or with governments’ approval. As the Secretary-General has stated in his report to the forthcoming Millennium Assembly of the UN; *“the task of effective proliferation control is made far harder than it needs to be because of irresponsible behaviour on the part of some states and lack of capacity by others, together with the shroud of secrecy that veils much of the arms trade. Member States must act to increase transparency in arms transfers if we are to make any progress (...) Controlling the proliferation of illicit weapons is a necessary first step towards the non-proliferation of small arms. These weapons must be brought under the*

control of states, and states must be held accountable for their transfer”.

Different regions are differently affected by the excessive and destabilizing accumulation of, and illicit trafficking in small arms. As already pointed out in the first report of the Secretary-General, solution to local problems should be tailored to local realities. Several regional and sub-regional organizations around the world have taken a leading role in putting forward solutions to the problems affecting them. In order to be of more effective assistance, the Department of Disarmament Affairs maintains three regional centres for Peace and Disarmament in key areas, Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. The Lome Centre supports the implementation of the ECOWAS Moratorium on the import, export, and manufacture of small arms. The main objective of the Centres is to sensitize the United Nations to the realities of these regions and, while assisting these countries, learn and gather information on different and valuable experiences.

In its quest for peace, the United Nations is finding new partners in the civil society and the private businesses. This partnership is bringing fruitful results and will be encouraged. As stated by the Secretary-General in his Millennium Report, *“Not only governments but also the private sector can and should help fund weapons collection programmes. This would be both a helpful and an appropriate contribution by major international corporations that have a presence in conflict-prone regions”*. As the fruits of peace and security will be enjoyed by society as a whole, finding solutions to common problems is everybody’s responsibility. As I already mentioned, it is paramount that communities take control of their own future. The United Nations is here to assist to the extent possible, but nothing can replace the willingness to build a better future together.

Civil society has been, and will remain, a key partner of the United Nations, not only in the issue of small arms, but also in every aspect of the work of the organization. The success of the Nobel prize-winning NGO network known as the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) underscored the important role played by civil society in providing expertise and mobilizing support, in cooperation with a group of like-minded States. The United Nations has endeavored to seek the cooperation, views and expertise of civil society in addressing the problems posed by small arms. As you very well know, since the EPG is affiliated with it, IANSA, the International

Action Network on Small Arms, features prominently amongst our cooperating partners.

We, the peoples of the United Nations, have yet another opportunity to bring peace and prosperity to the coming generations. It is true that much has been done in this area, especially by the NGO community. However, I trust that you will be able to provide new and insightful perspectives on the issue of the illicit trafficking in small arms. Your efforts, I believe, will greatly complement those of the United Nations, Member States, and other civil society organizations. I wish you every success in your endeavors.

^[i] The participants in CASA are as follows: the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), the Department of Political Affairs (DPA), the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), the Department of Public Information (DPI), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG/CAC), the N.Y. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), the N.Y. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Geneva-based United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) and the Vienna-based Centre for International Crime Prevention (CICP) of the Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (UNODCCP/CICP). Subsequently two bodies were invited by DDA to participate in the activities of CASA: the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the World Bank.