

Opening Address

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Ministerial Conference on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation, and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Africa

Organization of African Unity

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Introduction

We are assembled today for a very auspicious event indeed. This is the first ministerial-level conference of the Organization for African Unity devoted exclusively to the problem of curbing the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in Africa. It is appropriate that the continent that gave birth to human civilization would turn its creative energies to the discovery of ways and means of alleviating one of the gravest threats to human security at the dawn of a new millennium.

It is no accident that Mali was chosen as the venue for this Conference. Here, four years ago, the light of “La Flamme de la Paix” shone not only in the sky above Mali -- it has also served as a beacon for the rest the world. As Albert Schweitzer once said, “*Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing.*” I therefore want to pay a special tribute today to H. E. President Konare, whose statesmanship in organizing collective efforts against the illicit accumulation and transfers of small arms continues to light the way for further progress. I am sure that we see additional “Flammes de la Paix” over the years ahead, an activity that someday may -- in one form or another -- even spread into the realm of weapons of mass destruction.

I must also acknowledge the tireless efforts of H. E. Salim A. Salim, Secretary-General of

the OAU, to strengthen cooperation between the OAU and the United Nations and to promote a coordinated African approach to the UN Conference in 2001 on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects. I also wish to thank you, Secretary-General Salim, and your staff for encouraging cooperation between the OAU and the Lome Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa. The assistance that the Regional Centre has provided to the OAU in the process leading to this Conference is a case in point.

Finally, I wish to express my deep appreciation to those member states and other donors that have contributed to the Lome Regional Centre. This support is invaluable in helping the Centre to discharge effectively its mandates to assist African States in substantive areas of peace, security and disarmament.

The small arms problem in Africa

Africa, to be sure, has much to teach the world about virtually all the problems relating to small arms -- their rapid accumulation, their illicit sale, their indiscriminate and multiple uses, and their catastrophic costs to social and economic development. In West Africa alone, an estimated 2 million people have died through the use of such weapons just in the last decade. The South African Institute for Security Studies has recently estimated that there are some 11 million illegal firearms now circulating in the continent. The number could even be much higher, given the murkiness of this deadly trade.

The end of the Cold War -- which gave rise to optimistic hopes for a substantial “peace dividend” for civil societies everywhere -- has for many countries yielded neither dividends nor peace, only new liabilities and conflicts. This is particularly true in Africa, where the inflow and circulation of small arms and light weapons has fuelled “*les flammes de la guerre*” throughout the continent. It is true that these weapons do not themselves cause war. It is true also that there are many legitimate reasons for states to possess such weapons. And it is true that one of the most fundamental of all state responsibilities is the duty of national self defence.

Yet it is also true that the illicit trade in small arms has both prolonged and aggravated conflicts, while increasing civilian casualties, including among women and children. The proliferation of such weapons has led to the triumph of the bullet over the ballot in too many countries, as efforts to stem cross-national flows of such arms continue to suffer from the lack of financial and technical support. Hence we see a vicious circle of underlying social and political conflicts escalating all-too-easily into armed attacks, followed by retaliatory blows, the tragic spiral of revenge, competitive re-armament, new profits for mercenaries and illicit arms traffickers, and the further aggravation of the underlying conflicts. The result is a series of setbacks for development and reconstruction, new obstacles to peace-keeping and peace-building, and worst of all, a prevailing sense of hopelessness among entire societies, especially among the young.

It is almost impossible to overstate the implications of this threat to the dreams and aspirations of citizens throughout this continent. Virtually all of the solemn principles and objectives found in the UN Charter, for example, are jeopardized daily by the proliferation and use of these weapons. This ongoing tragedy is setting back economic development by creating new disincentives to foreign investment. It is creating new obstacles to the achievement of human rights objectives, including the most fundamental of all, the right to life. It is expanding new opportunities for domestic crime and banditry. It is aggravating problems faced by refugees. It is eroding the rule of law and the norm of the peaceful settlement of disputes. And the constant flow of these weapons across borders is also flouting the fundamental principles of self-determination and non-interference in internal affairs that lie at the heart of our present system of international relations.

Responding to the challenge

Responding to this challenge has not been easy and the road ahead will no doubt be difficult. There are no easy solutions -- there are no, as it were, magic bullets. The problem is multi-dimensional in that it relates to issues that are at once political, economic, social, and technological. It is complex in that relationships between causes and effects of this illicit trade are still poorly understood. It is a problem characterized by high uncertainty -- given the scarcity of reliable data about the production, transfers, and illicit stockpiles of these weapons. And it is a problem with high stakes -- for the future of entire nation states relies on how this problem is approached and solved, while the profits from a multi-billion-dollar illicit arms trade are also at stake.

The first serious step in establishing a global approach to the problem came with the organization of the 2001 UN Conference following a recommendation in the 1997 Report of the Panel of Experts. This initiative served to place the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons on the international security agenda and to ensure that the issue will receive the close attention of the highest levels of governments. Last September at the UN Millennium Summit, these leaders issued a declaration underscoring their resolve "to take concerted action to end illicit traffic in small arms and light weapons." A day later, the Security Council called for "effective international action to prevent the illegal flow of small arms into areas of conflict."

Through its reports and resolutions, the United Nations has worked hard to promote cooperative international action in recent years to address many of the global threats from small arms. The Lome Regional Centre has, for example, worked tirelessly to assist national, sub-regional, and regional efforts throughout this field. It has provided advice, organized workshops, promoted public education, and contributed to regional, sub-regional, and national efforts to address these threats. The UN stands ready to work with the OAU in the implementation of the results and

recommendations that would come out of this Conference.

The UN Department of Disarmament Affairs will continue to work closely with all states in their individual and collective efforts to make the 2001 UN Conference an unqualified success. The Department maintains the UN Register of Conventional Arms and is encouraging all states that have not yet done so to participate in this register. Though it does not yet address small arms, the register remains an important confidence-building measure by enhancing transparency of international shipments of major conventional weapons systems. Another of our responsibilities is to encourage all states to submit data on their military expenditures using the UN standardized reporting instrument.

Last week, I attended a Regional Preparatory Meeting in Brasilia for the 2001 UN Conference -- an important event that resulted in the "Brasilia Declaration," which outlined a common approach for Latin American and Caribbean States at next year's conference. The declaration endorsed the goal for next year's conference of adopting a political declaration and a global Programme of Action to address this problem. It is encouraging indeed to find similar coordination efforts underway now in Africa.

Africa's own responses to the small arms problem have the potential not only to alleviate local threats, but to inspire more effective responses at the global level as well. The problems of patrolling long and remote borders, of financing enforcement operations when funds are scarce, of obtaining reliable information about this illicit trade, and of discouraging the use of violence to solve political conflicts -- none of these are unique to Africa. How Africa solves these problems therefore will be of great interest throughout the world.

The recent history of these efforts would certainly include the OAU Summit at Algiers, which called in July 1999 for a coordinated African approach to the problem posed by the illicit trafficking, circulation, and proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The high-level participants also called upon the OAU Secretariat to organize this ministerial conference prior to the 2001 UN Conference. Recognizing the need for advice on many complex technical issues relating to this challenge, the OAU Secretariat organized a Meeting of African Experts on small arms and light weapons, as well as an International Consultation on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation, and Trafficking in Small Arms and Light Weapons.

It is encouraging indeed that these meetings adopted comprehensive recommendations on a common African approach to the problem, as well as toward the 2001 UN Conference. These recommendations included setting up an OAU coordinating mechanism to assist Member States, international and regional organizations, and civil society in relevant control efforts and in conducting a campaign to generate increased public awareness.

Participants at this Conference who have dealt personally with small arms issues will recognize the important role that African NGOs have played in this area and their potential for additional contributions in the future. The fact that the OAU has developed a close working relationship with South Africa's Institute for Security Studies is only one illustration of this cooperation.

The "Tools for Arms" and "Guns for Hoes" campaigns organized by the Mozambique Church Council offer another useful example of how citizen organizations can assist governments in addressing the scourge of small arms. Tens of thousands of weapons have been gathered in this effort. One local entrepreneur, Hilario Nhagugueja, has even developed a business of beating rifles into peacocks -- he takes parts of dismantled AK-47 rifles and converts them into sculptures of peacock tails. This is just one example of an effort that exchanges sewing machines, farming implements, tools, bicycles and other useful items for weapons. It offers a model, I might add, that has great potential for use in other regions. The UN Department of Disarmament Affairs -- together with UNDP -- is involved in a similar effort in Albania, called the "Weapons for Development" project, and we hope to begin a similar project in Niger.

We have also seen numerous sub-regional efforts in Africa to address this challenge. In Southern Africa, Member States of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) are in the process of negotiating a protocol on the control of firearms, ammunition, and other related materials in the SADC region. Cooperation is growing now among the law enforcement agencies in the sub-region, including the police, customs and border control authorities.

In Eastern Africa, the Foreign Ministers of all 10 countries of the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa met in Nairobi in March this year and adopted the Nairobi Declaration. This important document, among other things, urged all affected countries to ensure that all manufacturers, brokers, financiers, and transporters of small arms and light weapons were regulated through licensing. The Declaration also highlighted the importance of cooperation with the United Nations in dealing with the small arms problem. Illustrating the continuity of this effort, firearms experts from nine of these countries met in Nairobi earlier this month to identify specific measures to address this problem. I note also that Uganda has been chosen to host an Institute of African Firearms, to be located within the UN African Institute for Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders, to assist African governments in combating trafficking in firearms and ammunition.

Individual countries are also making their own contributions to addressing this collective threat. In Western Africa, many countries are making concerted efforts to ensure the full implementation of the ECOWAS moratorium on the importation, exportation, and manufacture of light weapons. This moratorium, the first major initiative of its kind in the world, was adopted by ECOWAS Members in 1998, building on the initiative of Mali and other states.

It is noteworthy that a number of West African countries have established national commissions against the proliferation of small arms, as encouraged by UN General Assembly resolutions. This is an important step in building national institutional capacity to address the small arms threat and additional states are now in the process of establishing such commissions.

Other responses by individual states have included the adoption or tightening of national laws and regulations to control the manufacture, possession, and transfer of small arms, and enlightened programmes to educate the public. Some states have also taken useful steps to physically destroy excess weapons stocks, one of the more notable being the announcement by South Africa in July 1999 that it would destroy more than 200,000 small arms. These are weapons that could have been sold or exported for cash, yet their destruction was surely in the interest of peace not profits. This problem of achieving the safe, economical, and reliable destruction of seized or surplus weapons remains a daunting challenge for governments everywhere, one that will require considerable national leadership and international cooperation.

National efforts are also needed outside of Africa, specifically efforts to enhance controls on the supply-side of the small arms equation. Arms manufacturing and exporting states must exercise the utmost restraint in supply arms to ensure that they do not find their way into regions embroiled in conflict. This need for concrete action was recently underscored by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who stated the following 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 [he added], but we must match the rhetoric of concern with the substance of practical action.

In his report on conflict in Africa, the UN Secretary-General also stated that “perhaps no other single initiative would do more to help combat the flow of illicit arms to Africa” than the public identification of the arms merchants who are supplying those arms. The goal here is clear: to take the profits out of proliferation.

Towards the 2001 UN Conference

Despite these diverse approaches to the problem, the challenge remains of integrating all these efforts into a wider global context. The decision by the UN General Assembly to convene a UN Conference on this issue is an energetic response to this specific challenge. The results of that conference will actually and potentially affect the lives of millions of people in Africa and around the world.

I am confident that Africa’s contributions will be crucial to the success of the conference

next July. Your practical, real-world experiences in dealing with illicit traffic in small arms will be invaluable to the design of practical, real-world responses to alleviate this threat. It is heartening that African states have played an active and important role in the PrepCom for this conference. The determined efforts of Ambassador Dos Santos of Mozambique -- the Chairman of the PrepCom -- also deserves international recognition.

Though a date and venue for the UN 2001 Conference were recently agreed in the UN General Assembly, informal consultations are continuing on other important issues, including the draft rules of procedure, agenda, the selection of a President, and the role for NGOs. There is, in short, much work ahead to ensure the success of the 2001 Conference, an event that will serve the interests of all states. While focusing on the resolution of the outstanding procedural issues, I hope that the PrepCom will also lay a solid foundation for progress on matters of substance, in particular the development of a Programme of Action to be adopted by the Conference.

As mandated by the Member States, the Chairman of the PrepCom and the Secretariat are working hard on an important paper entitled "Structure and Elements for a Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects." The goal is to make this paper available to delegations at the second PrepCom. I believe that the delegations, especially those from Africa, will respond positively and constructively to that important paper and make valuable contributions to its further development.

Conclusion

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In conclusion, let me say briefly that despite the many challenges we face in making the UN 2001 Conference a success, I am confident both that the event will in fact be a success and that this progress will be due in no small measure to contributions from African states. You have accumulated experience in the harsh realities of combating this threat that will prove invaluable to participants at this conference. The world has much to learn from this experience and you indeed have much to teach.

I hope also that the experience of preparing for this conference will lead to a wider recognition throughout international society of the many vital contributions that disarmament can make in accomplishing a wide array of other goals on the public agenda. Disarmament pays its own dividends: it saves lives and money. Weapons that have been destroyed -- or that have not been produced in the first place -- do not kill. They even enhance security by removing future threats. For over half a century, African leaders have either given their support to -- or have originated -- creative disarmament initiatives in the United Nations and other international fora. I salute those efforts and am confident that you will continue to press for a strong programme of action in the field of small arms as well.

So please accept my very best wishes in your work ahead, both during this present ministerial conference and over the months to come leading to the 2001 UN Conference. I have every confidence that the leaders and people of Africa will rise to this challenge.