

Excerpt from the Report of the Secretary-General to the Millennium Assembly (A/54/2000), sect. F.

F. Pursuing arms reductions

234. The post-cold-war era has seen both gains and setbacks in the realm of disarmament. On the positive side, the Ottawa Convention banning landmines and the Chemical Weapons Convention have both entered into force. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty has been concluded, nuclear safeguards have been strengthened and nuclear-weapon-free zones now embrace all of the southern hemisphere. Nuclear weapons numbers have almost halved since 1982, and world military expenditures declined by some 30 per cent between 1990 and 1998 (see figs. 8 and 9).

235. The rest of the picture is much less encouraging. Little meaningful progress has been achieved in limiting the proliferation of small arms. The nuclear non-proliferation regime has suffered major blows as a result of clandestine nuclear weapon programmes, the nuclear tests in South Asia and the unwillingness of key states to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

236. Advances in biotechnology are increasing the potential threat posed by biological weapons, while negotiations on a verification regime for the Biological Weapons Convention are being unnecessarily prolonged. For three years in a row now, the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva has not engaged in any negotiations because its members have been unable to agree on disarmament priorities.

237. I cannot here review the entire arms control spectrum. Instead, I focus on two categories of weapon that are of special concern: small arms and light weapons, because they currently kill most people in most wars; and nuclear weapons, because of their continuing terrifying potential for mass destruction.

Small arms

238. The death toll from small arms dwarfs that of all other weapons systems — and in

most years greatly exceeds the toll of the atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In terms of the carnage they cause, small arms, indeed, could well be described as “weapons of mass destruction”. Yet there is still no global non-proliferation regime to limit their spread, as there is for chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

239. Small arms proliferation is not merely a security issue; it is also an issue of human rights and of development. The proliferation of small arms sustains and exacerbates armed conflicts. It endangers peacekeepers and humanitarian workers. It undermines respect for international humanitarian law. It threatens legitimate but weak governments and it benefits terrorists as well as the perpetrators of organized crime.

240. Much of the cold war’s small arms surplus finished up in the world’s most dangerous conflict zones and, as the number of weapons in circulation increased, their price declined, making access to them ever easier even in the poorest countries. In parts of Africa in the mid-1990s, for example, deadly assault rifles could be bought for the price of a chicken or a bag of maize. Reducing the toll caused by these weapons will be difficult, not least because of the extraordinary number in circulation, which some estimates put as high as 500 million.

241. An estimated 50 to 60 per cent of the world’s trade in small arms is legal — but legally exported weapons often find their way into the illicit market. 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. I would also urge that they support regional disarmament measures, like the moratorium on the importing, exporting or manufacturing of light weapons in West Africa.

242. Even if all arms transfers could be eliminated, however, the problem posed by the many millions of illicitly held small arms already in circulation in the world’s war zones would remain.

243. Because most conflict-prone poor countries lack the capacity to detect and seize illicit weapons, a more promising path may be the use of market incentives. Outright buy-back programmes may simply stimulate arms imports from neighbouring countries,

but non-monetary reimbursement schemes have worked in Albania, El Salvador, Mozambique and Panama. In return for weapons, individuals may receive tools, such as sewing machines, bicycles, hoes and construction materials, and entire communities have been provided with new schools, health-care services and road repairs.

244. Not only governments but also the private sector can and should help fund such programmes. This would be a particularly appropriate contribution by major international corporations that have a presence in conflict-prone regions.

245. 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. The United Nations is convening a conference on the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in 2001, in which I hope civil society organizations will be invited to participate fully.

246. I urge Member States to take advantage of this conference to start taking serious actions that will curtail the illicit traffic in small arms.

247. 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.

Nuclear weapons

248. Let me now turn to nuclear weapons. When the bipolar balance of nuclear terror passed into history, the concern with nuclear weapons also seemed to drift from public consciousness. But some 35,000 nuclear weapons remain in the arsenals of the nuclear powers, with thousands still deployed on hair-trigger alert. Whatever rationale these

weapons may once have had has long since dwindled. Political, moral and legal constraints on actually using them further undermine their strategic utility without, however, reducing the risks of inadvertent war or proliferation.

249. The objective of nuclear non-proliferation is not helped by the fact that the nuclear weapon states continue to insist that those weapons in their hands enhance security, while in the hands of others they are a threat to world peace.

250. If we were making steady progress towards disarmament, this situation would be less alarming. Unfortunately the reverse is true. Not only are the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks stalled, but there are no negotiations at all covering the many thousands of so-called tactical nuclear weapons in existence, or the weapons of any nuclear power other than those of the Russian Federation and the United States of America.

251. Moreover, unless plans to deploy missile defences are devised with the agreement of all concerned parties, the progress achieved thus far in reducing the number of nuclear weapons may be jeopardized. Confidence-building is required to reassure states that their nuclear deterrent capabilities will not be negated.

252. Above all else, we need a reaffirmation of political commitment at the highest levels to reducing the dangers that arise both from existing nuclear weapons and from further proliferation.

253. To help focus attention on the risks we confront and on the opportunities we have to reduce them, I propose that consideration be given to convening a major international conference that would help to identify ways of eliminating nuclear dangers.