

24 September 1999



Press Release

SG/SM/7145

SC/6733

ADDRESSING THE SECURITY COUNCIL, SECRETARY-GENERAL SAYS INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY MUST REVERSE GLOBAL PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS

19990924

Following is the text of the Secretary-General's statement today to the Security Council meeting on small arms:

I am pleased to join you today in this effort to tackle one of the key challenges in preventing conflict in the next century. Small arms and light weapons are primary tools of violence in many conflicts taking place in the world.

The proliferation of small arms, ammunition and explosives has also aggravated the violence associated with terrorism and organized crime. Even in societies not beset by civil war, the easy availability of small arms has in many cases contributed to violence and political instability.

These, in turn, have damaged development prospects and imperilled human security in every way. Indeed, there is probably no single tool of conflict so widespread, so easily available, and so difficult to restrict, as small arms.

Not only are they the primary instrument of the murder of civilians who are increasingly targeted in the wars of our era. Unlike their victims, small arms survive from conflict to conflict, perpetuating the cycle of violence by their mere presence.

Many of these weapons are even recycled, passed on from one area to another or from one conflict to another by unscrupulous arms merchants, who in many cases take advantage of legal loopholes or exploit inadequate national monitoring and enforcement structures.

In an era where the world will no longer stand by in silence when gross and systematic violations of human rights are being committed, the United Nations is dedicated to addressing both the supply and demand aspects of the trade in small arms.

From the Balkans to East Asia and to Africa, small arms have become the instrument of choice for the killers of our time. We must do our part to deny them the means for murder.

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The United Nations has played a leading role in putting the issue of small arms firmly on the international agenda. The Report on Small Arms, which I submitted to the General Assembly in 1997, has served as a catalyst for a wider series of initiatives.

Last December, I was very pleased to note that the General Assembly decided to convene a conference on all aspects of illicit arms trafficking no later than 2001. The Security Council has also been seized with the small arms issue, initially in the context of the implementation of my report on Africa.

Since then, in the context of Angola, as well as those of children in armed conflict and the protection of civilians in armed conflict, the Council has shown wisdom in focusing on the need to reverse the proliferation of small arms if any of these issues is to be successfully resolved.

In my report to the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, I stated that controlling the easy availability of small arms is a prerequisite for a successful peace-building process, as it is for conflict prevention.

I appealed to the Council to devote greater attention to conflict prevention and provide effective leadership in this area. In addition, I wish to stress the importance of including in peace agreements and mandates of all United Nations peacekeeping operations, specific measures for disarmament and demobilization.

While great challenges still await us, we should take note of a number of positive developments in the struggle against small arms proliferation, and particularly illicit arms trafficking.

In Africa, through an initiative led by Mali, the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS) declared a moratorium on the production and transfer of small arms, covering 16 countries. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is assisting ECOWAS in implementing that moratorium.

The Organization of African Unity has also moved forward in deciding to hold a regional conference on small arms in preparation for the international conference on illicit arms trafficking.

In Europe, joint action by the European Union in preventing and combating illicit trafficking in conventional arms is another promising step. More specifically, in Albania, the UNDP, in close collaboration with the Department for Disarmament Affairs, has been engaged in a "Weapons for Development" project. The success of that pilot project has encouraged the Albanian Government to invite similar projects in other parts of Albania.

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And in the Americas, the Organization of American States adopted in November 1997 the Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives and Other Related Materials.

The momentum for combating small arms proliferation has also come from civil society, which has been increasingly active on this issue.

The establishment early this year of the International Action Network on Small Arms has helped to sharpen public focus on small arms, which has helped us gain the public support necessary for success.

The international community must seize the opportunity provided by the international conference in the year 2001 to demonstrate its political will and its commitment to reversing the global proliferation of small arms.

Our larger efforts to promote peace and security -- whether through conflict prevention, development, diplomacy or, when necessary, intervention -- depend to a great extent on how we tackle the smaller, more specific challenges of limiting the tools of war and violence.

In the struggle against small arms, there is a realistic, achievable goal that can be met through foresight, action, and cooperation. With the leadership of the Security Council, and the active efforts of your governments, I am confident that we can succeed

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