

Statement by Amb. Koonjul on Small Arms –
11 October 2002

Let me first thank Mr. Jayantha Dhanapala, Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, for introducing the report of the Secretary-General. I would also like to thank your delegation, Mr. President, and the delegation of Colombia for circulating the orientation papers for this meeting, which we found extremely useful.

Today we are having yet another discussion, following a fresh report from the Secretary-General setting out the serious security, humanitarian and development challenges posed by the proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons. Last year saw the convening of a United Nations Conference on this important issue, at which a Programme of Action was adopted. Likewise, the Security Council adopted a presidential statement on 31 August of last year which contained several recommendations on ways to combat arms trafficking. In addition, we have had a series of regional and sub-regional initiatives such as the Bamako Declaration and the moratorium declared by the Economic Community of West African States, all aimed at checking the illicit flow of small arms and light weapons. Yet we have not seen any substantial reduction in the circulation of illicit small arms and light weapons. If anything, the illicit flow has increased. The current situation in Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, with the sudden appearance of a large number of sophisticated weapons, clearly shows that we have had little success in addressing this scourge.

Today's meeting should therefore aim at identifying concrete and practical ways and means to curb and to eliminate the illicit flow of small arms and light weapons. We need to look beyond the classical approach of simply coming out with another statement which will remain a dead letter.

We thank the Secretary-General for his report on small arms and for the importance that he attaches to this issue. We fully support his 12 recommendations. The statistics presented in the report are very alarming. He says that 40 per cent of the estimated 639 million small arms in the world today are held illegally. Half a million people, mostly women, the elderly and children, fall victim to small and light weapons annually. These are indeed matters of very serious concern.

The problem of illicit flows of small arms and light weapons affects almost every region of the world. However, Africa remains the most severely affected continent, with certain parts, namely the Horn of Africa and the Western African region, being particularly afflicted. Those regions have become the leading destinations for illicit weapons, fuelling conflicts and causing economic decline and political instability, which, in turn, have had serious humanitarian consequences. Small arms and light weapons are also easily finding their way into the hands of bandits and terrorists, who, as we all know, are causing havoc throughout the world.

We should ask ourselves today why the international community has not so far been able to make any serious dent in the illicit flow of small arms and light weapons. Several reasons can be put forward to explain this situation. I will try to enumerate just a few of them which my delegation considers to be very important.

First, it is our view that there has not been enough concerted and coordinated effort to address the issue in a comprehensive manner. The General Assembly has been doing things on its own, and the Security Council has been pursuing its efforts on its own. There have been several plans at the regional and sub-regional levels as well. For example, two years ago the countries of the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa launched an initiative to combat the problem of arms trafficking.

While we encourage all such initiatives, it is extremely important that there be proper coordination not only at the regional and sub-regional levels but also at the international level, since the problem can be tackled only if all key players - producers, buyers, dealers and middlemen- cooperate fully. In that respect, the United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects adopted last year was a major step towards a global approach to fighting the proliferation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons. It is also important that the General Assembly and the Security Council work closely together to ensure proper coordination. We therefore fully support the Secretary-General's recommendation to set up a small arms advisory service to ensure, inter alia, the optimal coordination and harmonization of the United Nations response on this matter.

Secondly, there is very little follow-up or monitoring to ensure that decisions and recommendations are actually being implemented. Apart from

those areas which are under arms embargoes and where appropriate monitoring mechanisms exist, the implementation of decisions is very much left to the will and discretion of individual countries. Hence, in many parts of Africa, especially where there are ongoing conflicts, very little attention is paid to the implementation and follow-up of decisions. Since we all agree that small arms are indeed contributing enormously to fuelling conflicts, it is time for the Council to seriously look into the matter and to set up some kind of system which will help monitor the compliance of Member States with all decisions relating to small arms.

Thirdly, my delegation has always stressed that arms-producing countries should act with utmost responsibility in arms sales transactions. It is important that all sales be made to bona fide dealers and that the end-users are clearly known. It is equally important that weapon manufacturers appropriately mark their weapons to enable easy identification and tracing if required. In that regard, we fully support the Secretary-General's recommendation that the Council should encourage States that have not already done so to establish the necessary legislative and regulatory measures, including the use of authenticated end-user certificates, to ensure effective control over the export and transit of small arms and light weapons. We also support the idea that Member States should enter all details about the transfers of small and light weapons in regional registers and in the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms. It is also important that buyer countries exercise full and effective control over the arms that they buy or possess. It has been documented, for example, that arms which have been declared destroyed by fire in some countries have actually found their way into the hands of rebel groups in other parts of the continent.

Fourthly, we are yet to find an effective way to deal with brokers and middlemen involved in the trade of small arms and light weapons. The greater part of arms sales, both legal and illegal, are made through the intervention of intermediaries and brokers. In the case of illegal arms deals, monitoring mechanisms in respect of arms embargoes time and again point to the same individuals or companies, which continue to operate unaffected. It is not a mere coincidence that the same names have been cited by the panels of experts on Angola, Sierra Leone and Liberia. These same names also appear on the list of those involved in the trade of illegally exploited natural resources. We believe that, as long as actions are not taken against those individuals and those engaged in such activities, the illicit trade in

small arms and light weapons will continue and that the weapons will continue to fall into the wrong hands, perpetuating a vicious cycle.

The members of the international community, particularly those with sophisticated intelligence services, must assist the countries directly affected by the illicit trafficking to combat this scourge. Member States must maintain strict national registration of each arms manufacturer, dealer, broker, transporter and financier, even where they are arranging deliveries through third countries, and both buyer and seller must use only registered brokers and dealers.

Fifthly, incomplete or improper disarmament, demobilization and reintegration are another factor that has an important bearing on the illicit flow of small arms and light weapons. A comprehensive programme of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration should aim at achieving full collection and disposal of all arms and light weapons. Before the disposal of these weapons, it is important that they be properly catalogued and that their origins be traced back for reference purposes and, if necessary, for appropriate action against culprits. We must at all costs prevent the sale of such weapons by one former combatant to another. We should encourage weapons buy-back programmes, which have proved quite successful in some parts of Africa.

As of now, this objective is heavily dependent on voluntary funding. In this regard, we appeal for the support and assistance of the donor community. At the same time, we favour the idea of including in the mandate of peacekeeping operations clear provisions regarding the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants, as well as specific measures for collection and disposal of illicit and surplus arms and light weapons. We are also amongst those who believe that disarmament, demobilization and reintegration should not entirely depend upon voluntary contributions from Member States. In this context, we welcome the recommendation made by the Secretary-General in his special report on the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo regarding the new approach to funding the disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation or resettlement programme.

Finally, I would like to touch upon the question of arms embargoes and their enforcement. My delegation believes that arms embargoes bring

temporary solutions to the problem of small arms and light weapons. The Secretary-General has rightly pointed out in his report that “While arms embargoes help to stop arms flows into the targeted countries and to rebel groups, they do not eradicate small arms and light weapons that already exist in areas of conflict”. These weapons continue to move from one country to another, from one rebel group to another, and the embargoes themselves in some cases have failed to prevent the flow of weapons. While we do recognize their limited success, my delegation does not believe that arms embargoes represent the exclusive solution in stopping and eradicating the flow of small arms and light weapons. The problem needs to be addressed in a more comprehensive and concerted manner at the national, regional and global levels in order to ensure a lasting solution.