REMARKS BY UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL DHANAPALA
BEFORE THE FIRST COMMITTEE, 2 October 2000

My congratulations to you, Mr. Chairman, and the members of the bureau, on your election to guide the work of this Committee. Your diplomatic career in the field of disarmament -- including your persistent efforts in the field of global nuclear disarmament -- equips you well for the tasks ahead.

With the opening of the first General Debate of this Committee in the new millennium -- on a day that also marks the anniversary of the birth of Mahatma Gandhi -- it is surely appropriate to recall some of the extraordinary events we have witnessed this year. These events remind us of the important contributions this Committee has made and can make in promoting the development of a global “rule of law” in the disarmament field, even in the face of difficult obstacles.

The urgency of this endeavour is underscored by some harsh realities of our time. The world is simply awash with arms -- some 30,000 nuclear warheads on the one hand, some 500 million small arms on the other. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute has recently reported that global military expenditure has -- for the first time since the end of the Cold War -- started to rise. The figure for 1999 was roughly $780 billion. Meanwhile, almost half of the world’s population lives on less than $2 per day. Let the tragic contrast between these numbers touch the conscience of us all as we embark on our work.

The Millennium has provided a unique opportunity for the world community to reflect on these sombre facts. It has stimulated a global inquiry into how each country -- indeed each person -- can contribute through the United Nations to the improvement of the quality of life on this planet. Members of this Committee will note, in this respect, that their leaders and their citizens who participated in these Millennium-related events clearly and unambiguously endorsed the vital need for greater progress on several important disarmament issues.

Earlier this year, the Secretary-General’s Millennium Report identified two important priorities in this field -- the global elimination of nuclear weapons and progress in the control of small arms. These themes, among others, were echoed by over a thousand non-governmental organizations that participated in the “We the Peoples Millennium Forum” held in May. In August, the “Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders” issued a universal call to abolish all weapons of mass destruction. This call was echoed in early September at the “Conference of Presiding Officers of National Parliaments,” organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Culminating all these events, the historic UN Millennium Declaration of 8 September stressed the need for progress in eliminating all weapons of mass destruction, ending illicit traffic in small arms and light weapons, and universalising legal norms relating to landmines. The
Declaration issued after the Security Council’s Summit also stressed the “critical importance” of disarmament in the context of post-conflict situations. We thus have a unique opportunity to convert this vision into reality.

These were not by any means the only positive developments in disarmament this year. Last May, the States Parties attending the 2000 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons agreed on practical steps to implement Article VI of the Treaty pertaining to nuclear disarmament. These included an “unequivocal undertaking” by the nuclear-weapon states to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals. They also agreed that the achievement of this goal offers the “only absolute guarantee” against the use of such weapons -- a conclusion that strikes at the very foundations of nuclear deterrence and missile defence as alternative security measures. The Final Document also re-affirmed that full-scope IAEA safeguards were a “necessary precondition” for new nuclear supply arrangements -- yet another step ahead for this new global norm.

The deliberations in this Committee over the next five weeks will reveal the degree of political will to implement these various undertakings. Because many of these commitments are legally binding, the success of international disarmament efforts will continue to depend heavily upon the rule of law, which requires careful nurturing. We have, for example, a variety of important treaties that still fall short of universal membership or that have not been ratified by key states. The Secretary-General drew attention to this issue during the Millennium Summit and his efforts resulted in several new adherents to six disarmament-related treaties. We have seen progress in recent years with respect to the CTBT and START II, yet these treaties are still not in force.

We have three states with well-known nuclear weapons capabilities and unsafeguarded nuclear facilities that remain outside the NPT, while many other States Parties have not concluded their respective IAEA safeguards agreements -- including the Additional Protocol. In his remarks at the 2000 NPT Review Conference, the IAEA Director General noted that one State Party “remains in non-compliance with its safeguards agreement” and that “the Agency has not been in a position since December 1998 to implement its mandate” under relevant UN Security Council resolutions with respect to another State Party.

Meanwhile, despite persistent efforts to promote universal membership in the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), many states remain non-parties. Other efforts have long been underway to create a verification protocol for the BWC, a goal that, once achieved, will significantly enhance international confidence in full implementation by all states of their obligations under that treaty. With respect to Africa, the number of States Parties to the Pelindaba Treaty continue to fall well short of the number required for that treaty to enter into force. And while discussions continue over a possible new nuclear-weapon-free zone in Central Asia, significant obstacles prevent the creation of such
zones in other key regions, including the Middle East, Central Europe, South Asia, East Asia, and the Southern Hemisphere.

The failure once again of the Conference on Disarmament to agree on a substantive work agenda this year has also frustrated the negotiation of new international legal norms, as seen in the inability of its members to reach a consensus on terms for multilateral negotiations on nuclear disarmament, the prevention of an arms race in outer space, and the fissile material treaty, while efforts to conclude a treaty on negative security assurances continue to languish in that important forum.

In the field of disarmament, it is of course difficult to have a functioning rule of law without transparency, and in this respect it is disturbing indeed that the peoples of the world still do not know for certain the number of nuclear weapons there are around them. The rule of law also presumes the existence of a credible means of enforcement, though the enforcement of disarmament norms remains one of the most difficult challenges facing the international community.

Yet the under-development of the rule of law is perhaps most apparent in the field of nuclear-weapon delivery systems, despite the disarmament goal covering such systems found in the Preamble of the NPT. There are some grounds for hope that the international community will take up the challenge noted in April last year by the Secretary-General when he commented on the lack of multilateral norms with respect both to missiles and missile defences. As international awareness of this problem continues to grow, one can well expect increased multilateral consideration of the issue. A similar problem exists with respect to other delivery systems for weapons of mass destruction.

With respect to missile defence, the world welcomed the recent decision by the United States to postpone the deployment of a national missile defense system. Efforts must now continue to develop multilateral norms governing existing missile arsenals and the global missile proliferation threat, while preserving the ABM Treaty as the “cornerstone of strategic stability” -- yet another important goal identified in the Final Document of the 2000 NPT Review Conference.

The rule of law with respect to conventional arms remains severely under-developed, though the convening next year of the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects offers an excellent opportunity for significant progress. The extraordinary death and destruction -- particularly in the civilian sector -- that has resulted from such weapons simply can no longer be ignored by the international community. This makes it all the more important for states to reach an early decision on a date and venue for this important conference and to proceed expeditiously with the business at hand.
I am pleased in this connection to report that I have just returned from witnessing the destruction of over a thousand small arms in a “Flamme de la Paix” in Agadez, Niger. This event -- along with the moratorium on the import, export, or manufacture of light weapons announced two years ago by ECOWAS -- illustrates some of the progressive disarmament activities underway in West Africa. Niger, with its desperate poverty, is endeavouring to nurture a fragile peace and a recently-elected democratic government. The Department of Disarmament Affairs, along with UNDP, proposes to embark on a weapons-for-development programme for which the generous assistance of the donor community is urgently needed. Initiatives such as these deserve specific recognition and vigorous support throughout the world community.

Yet two important UN tools for transparency and confidence-building in the field of conventional arms continue to show signs of stagnation and even regression, in the face of the reluctance by many states to make use of them. An expert group has been examining ways and means to increase participation in the Register of Conventional Arms and I hope their views will reach a wide audience and receive close attention by all states that have neglected to use this specific tool. Many countries also have not used the standardized reporting instrument for military expenditures. At a time of rising military budgets, it becomes all the more important to have reliable information about the scope of this particular problem.

With respect to landmines, the States Parties to the Mine Ban Convention and the amended Protocol to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons are continuing their efforts to achieve full universality of membership in these important accords. Two weeks ago, the States Parties to the Mine Ban Convention held their second meeting and addressed several important issues, including victim assistance and the most fundamental goal of disarmament -- namely, stockpile destruction.

The agenda before this Committee is, in light of this brief survey, once again challenging and robust. Its work will be closely scrutinized by groups throughout civil society that have played an increasingly proactive role in disarmament discussions both inside and outside the UN system. These groups help to build a solid foundation of political support for all types of disarmament measures. Their advocacy work parallels disarmament education efforts underway in the UN -- efforts that the Secretary-General’s Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters has recently underscored in importance. With firm determination, backed by support and understanding from civil society, there is indeed potential for progress in all fields of disarmament.

The Committee also has a solemn responsibility to remain vigilant about emerging issues, a task that is performed with the assistance of another important component of the UN disarmament machinery: the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), which is now celebrating its
20th anniversary. I congratulate Director Patricia Lewis and her small but dedicated staff for enriching the disarmament community with high quality research. I also want to take this opportunity to invite all members of this Committee to attend a forward-looking discussion meeting jointly hosted by UNIDIR and the Department of Disarmament Affairs on “Disarmament as Humanitarian Action.” Scheduled to be held in this room on Tuesday, 17 October, this event will explore the extent to which disarmament -- whether of weapons of mass destruction or conventional arms -- can be viewed as a question of human security, an activity with substantial humanitarian benefits.

Today, it is increasingly apparent that disarmament pays dividends that can serve virtually all the purposes and objectives under the Charter. In the years to come, as disarmament gradually becomes increasingly mainstreamed as a fundamental UN activity -- as I hope it will -- the impact and importance of the deliberations in this Committee will only grow as a natural result. The ultimate sustainability of disarmament -- not just as a fundamental activity of the United Nations, but as a priority for action by national governments and non-governmental organizations -- depends not just on the ideal it inspires, but the practical results it delivers.

It is in these realms of norm-building and practical action that the Department of Disarmament Affairs seeks to make its mark. Though we are the smallest department in the UN, we have not let our limited resources erode our commitment to excellence and productivity in all our work. Our publications -- such as the *Disarmament Yearbook* and the newsletter, *DDA Update* -- are widely used throughout the disarmament community. We continue to make indispensable administrative and substantive contributions to numerous international disarmament conferences and events. Our regional centres continue to assist in our outreach activities making disarmament relevant to the practical needs of member states. We work closely with Member States and with groups from civil society and are committed to expanding this cooperation. We take our public information and education responsibilities seriously and will remain a vigorous source of advocacy for all mandated disarmament activities and initiatives.

In this regard, I encourage all delegations to visit the new Disarmament Exhibit that will be located on the third floor of the General Assembly building -- Messenger of Peace Michael Douglas will participate in the opening of this exhibit on 23 October. Also, the Department has -- with the Department for Public Information -- jointly produced an excellent film about the global small arms problem, called “Armed to the Teeth.” This documentary, the first of its kind on this global threat, will have its premiere at the UN on 16 October in the presence of the Secretary-General and I highly commend it to all delegations. It is an especially timely production.

Finally, the Department continues to train young diplomats, especially those from developing countries, through the UN disarmament fellowship programme. This year’s 28 fellows will soon join the ranks of the roughly five hundred other officials from more than 150 countries that have
participated in the programme since its creation by the General Assembly at its Tenth Special Session in 1978.

On these encouraging notes, Mr. Chairman, I offer you my most sincere best wishes for success and my assurances of the full support and cooperation of the Department of Disarmament Affairs in all your work in the weeks ahead.