Implementation of the Programme of Action adopted at the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects: The Asia-Pacific Perspective

Opening Remarks by

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Distinguished Co-Chairs,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am both pleased and honoured to open the Asia-Pacific Regional Seminar on the Implementation of the Programme of Action adopted at the July 2001 United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects. I am particularly grateful to the governments of Indonesia and Japan, who are co-chairing the meeting with the UN Department of Disarmament Affairs, for providing their generous hospitality and support.

The Asia-Pacific region covers a vast and diverse area that is difficult to cover with blanket characterizations. It is the one continent that lacks a trans-continental regional organization comparable to the OAS, the OSCE and the AU. Overall, military expenditures in the region have increased significantly since 1998, at a higher rate than the worldwide average, with the exception of Oceania, although in some parts this is difficult to confirm due to lack of transparency. The rate of participation in the UN Register of Conventional Arms has been fairly good, hovering around 60%. On the other hand, the number of countries reporting to the standardized instrument for reporting military expenditures has been low, with less than a quarter of States in the region contributing input. Although participation in both instruments has increased substantially in the last few years, it could still be greatly improved and it is clear that increased transparency is needed in the region.

The region is also home to a large number of illicit small arms and light weapons. There are a large number of firearms left over from conflicts that flow to other parts of the region and feed violent crime as well as additional conflicts. In a statement at the Security Council open debate on small arms on 11 October 2002, the representative of the Philippines noted that “of the total recorded crimes committed with firearms in the Philippines last year, 85% were committed with unlicensed or illegally possessed firearms.”

A number of States in the region have been very active at all levels in implementing the Programme of Action. While this is the second regional meeting that Indonesia has hosted on illicit small arms and light weapons, regional meetings have also been held in the Philippines, Thailand and Japan, including a meeting of Pacific Island States held in Tokyo last month.

**Legislation**

The Asia-Pacific region has a long and interesting history with firearms control. Recently, Australia, with its historic National Firearms Agreement of 1996, and additional measures that were adopted later -- has developed some of the world’s most stringent gun control legislation, including bans on specific types of firearms; registration systems; strict requirements for licensing; safety training for licence holders; minimum standards for security and storage; and
record keeping. Australian legislation also encompasses import and export controls, criminalizing smuggling and prohibiting transfers to countries under embargoes decided by the United Nations Security Council. This demonstrates just a few of the important ways that national laws and regulations can work to advance global norms.

Adequate national legislation is especially important in addressing the particular problems associated with the spread of illicit small arms and light weapons. The Australian Firearms Agreement came about following the Port Arthur massacre in 1996. Efforts by governments and civil society advocates to strengthen gun control legislation also ensued following massacres in Canada, France, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and upon recognition of alarmingly high murder rates in countries like Brazil and South Africa. I hope that other States will be able to benefit from their experiences to adapt their legislation without having to endure similarly tragic events.

A number of measures in the Programme of Action deal specifically with legislative issues. It calls on states, for example, “to put in place, where they do not exist, adequate laws, regulations and administrative procedures to exercise effective control over the production of small arms and light weapons within their areas of jurisdiction and over the export, import, transit or retransfer of such weapons …”. In addition, States undertake to adopt measures to criminalize illegal manufacture, possession, stockpiling and trade of small arms and light weapons.

The Programme of Action also deals with some particular and technical aspects of legislation and administrative procedures in specific areas of concern, such as marking, tracing and record-keeping, brokering and export, import and transfer controls. In that connection, end-user certificates are a particularly pertinent issue at this time. Reinforcing the measures in the Programme of Action, a recent Security Council Presidential Statement urged member States to consistently and responsibly employ end-user certificates in their transfers of small arms and light weapons and called on States to establish a national end-user certificate system. But most importantly, it called on States to study the feasibility of developing a system for end-user certificates at the regional and global levels, as well as an information exchange and verification mechanism.

The Programme of Action also calls on States to make public their national laws, regulations and procedures that affect the prevention, combating and eradicating of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects and to submit them voluntarily to relevant international organizations. The Department of Disarmament Affairs has been compiling this national legislation and making it available on our website. From the Asia-Pacific region, we have already received legislation from Australia, China and India. I would encourage States that have not already done so, to submit their legislation to the Department. This is a simple but invaluable step that will help to demonstrate how the global norms in the Programme of Action are serving
as a guide to governmental actions throughout this vital region.

**Stockpile Management**

In addition to legislation, the Programme of Action includes provisions relating to standards and procedures in a number of key areas for action, including stockpile management. Proper stockpile management is critical to effectively block one of the channels that enable weapons to leak into illicit markets.

In the Programme of Action, States pledge to “establish adequate and detailed standards and procedures relating to the management and security of their stocks of these weapons,” including the location of facilities, security measures, and training of staff. They also agree to review regularly their stocks and to identify surplus weapons for disposal. This raises a basic question: are the experiences gained in one region readily transferable to another?

Last year the Department of Disarmament Affairs undertook a number of field activities in relation to stockpile management and weapons destruction in Latin America. Through the Lima Regional Centre, in cooperation with the OAS and UNDP, the Department assisted representatives of the police and judicial system to destroy over 17,000 surplus firearms and 8,000 rounds of ammunition and to improve two storage facilities. A detailed lessons-learned manual is now being prepared, including recommendations in areas such as security measures and modern computerized record-keeping systems that are compatible with Interpol. This type of lessons-learned experience, which can be applied to other countries and regions, has enormous potential to contribute to the growing pool of knowledge that the entire world can draw upon to strengthen the very foundations of international peace and security.

**National Points of Contact and National Commissions**

The Programme of Action also calls upon States “to establish or designate national coordination agencies or bodies and institutional infrastructure responsible for policy guidance, research and monitoring of efforts to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects,” and to designate a national point of contact on the implementation of the Programme of Action.

At the Department of Disarmament Affairs, we have so far compiled a list of some 80 national points of contact and placed it on our website. Our goal is to compile a complete list of all national points of contact and to keep that list up to date and available in order to facilitate coordination among States and between them and the United Nations and other relevant stakeholders.

The primary responsibility for addressing the challenge of illicit small arms and light
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weapons rests with States. Consequently these States -- in particular those most affected by the scourge of the illicit arms market -- must accept their responsibility to address these issues and provide solutions to meet their specific needs. Truly sustainable solutions to these challenges must not be imposed from without, but embraced from within as legitimate reflections of concrete national interests.

This suggests that efforts to address small arms threats should reflect the principle of “unity in diversity” -- the national commissions will undoubtedly respond to the need for diverse approaches to issues, yet they should never lose sight of the common dimensions of the weapons challenges faced by all nations. Given that the problems vary in each State or Region – some suffer from the proliferation of weapons after a conflict, others from violent crime, and still others from the tragedy of war-affected children, both as victims and as child soldiers – each state must decide for itself on the appropriate composition and focus of its national commissions. All nations, however, face the common challenges of dealing with such issues as the expanding international market for illicit arms, the phenomenon of trans-national organized crime, continuing terrorist threats, and other such problems that are truly global in scope.

My further hope is that this process of bringing together the various interests and constituencies and integrating them in common pursuits can also advance the cause of good governance. This is especially relevant in post-conflict societies that have often witnessed the collapse of local infrastructures including key governmental institutions.

In the Department of Disarmament Affairs, we are actively working with Governments to put these ideas into practice. For example, in response to a request by the Government of Sri Lanka for assistance in dealing with illicit small arms and light weapons, DDA led an assessment mission in February 2002. As a result of that mission, DDA, with the Department for Economic and Social Affairs, and UNDP, designed a project to be implemented in the country. The project begins with the establishment of a National Commission Against the Proliferation of Illicit Small Arms (NCAPISA). Once the National Commission begins functioning, other possible activities -- such as weapons-for- development projects and media campaigns -- will follow.

In support of the establishment of a National Commission in Mozambique, DDA also formed a working group with DESA and UNDP that provides policy and programme advice upon the request of Mozambican authorities. In addition, our Regional Centre in Lome provided support to the Government of Togo in the establishment of its National Commission for the Fight Against the Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons. Our Centre in Lima has provided similar support to the Government of Peru. We look forward to building upon these experiences and encouraging the establishment of national commissions in other affected countries.

A Small Arms Advisory Service
As an additional initiative to assist States in implementing the Programme of Action, the Department of Disarmament Affairs has proposed the creation of a Small Arms Advisory Service. The Service, which would be partly funded from extra-budgetary resources, would provide policy advice and assist in the mobilization of financial support for projects, in response to requests, through mechanisms such as the Group of Interested States in Practical Disarmament Measures.

The Service would also function as the Secretariat of the Coordinating Action on Small Arms (CASA) mechanism, which the Secretary-General established in 1998 to coordinate small arms related efforts within the UN system. Because of the multifaceted nature of the problem, there is a need to facilitate the participation of all relevant agencies in the preparation and conduct of assessment missions, and ensure that projects benefit from the views and inputs of all relevant agencies.

The Service would also be responsible for collating and circulating information, as requested in the Programme of Action. Given that we are still in the early stages of developing global norms, timely and accurate information is an important element of effective policy and actions. There are a number of initiatives we are considering to make the information we collect useful for States and others involved in implementing the Programme of Action, including more extensive development of our website so that it might serve as a clearinghouse for practical information. I strongly believe that a dedicated Service within the Department is essential for the success of our efforts.

The 2003 Biennial Meeting

This year, the international community will have its first opportunity, at the 2003 Biennial Meeting of Member States to review the implementation of the Programme of Action, which will be held from 7 to 11 July in New York. Participating states must use this opportunity to identify areas of concern; to engender a better fit between needs and resources; to identify best practices; and to establish priorities in both the supply and demand side of the problem and in short, medium and long-term time frames. The success of the meeting will depend critically on the quality of the national reports and the debates on substantive issues.

The Asia Pacific region can contribute a unique and invaluable perspective to the international dialogue, as it has experienced both the supply and demand sides of the problems associated with the spread of illicit small arms and light weapons. The region has also experienced first hand the horrifying effects resulting from transfers of illicit small arms from post-conflict zones to other areas, engendering instability and insecurity at the national and regional levels.
Writing at the time of the First World War, India’s great writer, Rabindranath Tagore wrote:

*He has made his weapons his gods.*

*When his weapons win he is defeated himself.*

Unfortunately, the Asia-Pacific region has not been spared one of the most dangerous trends of the modern age -- namely, a flawed premise one often finds both in government and in parts of civil society that security flows from the accumulation of weapons. The July meeting offers a valuable opportunity for all States from this great region to recount their experiences in coping with such weapons and to chart a course for a safer and more secure world. Let us work together to ensure that humanity’s weapons do not become humanity’s nemesis.

Thank you.