



ORGANISATION OF AFRICAN UNITY

STATEMENT BY
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AT THE OPENING OF

THE FIRST CONTINENTAL MEETING OF
AFRICAN EXPERTS ON SMALL ARMS
AND LIGHT WEAPONS

UN CONFERENCE CENTRE
ADDIS ABABA

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It is with great pleasure that I wish to welcome you all to this opening of the First Continental Meeting of African Experts on Small Arms and Light Weapons organized by the OAU. The presence of so many representative experts from the Member States of our Continental Organization and the attendance by some Members of the Eminent Persons Group, including its esteemed co-chairperson, Mr. Michel Rocard, the former Prime Minister of France who is to join us here; and Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun, the UN Secretary General's Special Advisor on Africa, is a testimony and a reaffirmation of the serious concern attached to the issue of small arms and its ramifications to our Continent, by governments, non-governmental organizations, as well as by the world pre-eminent institution, the United Nations. For us at the General Secretariat, we are also particularly pleased to have in our midst Mr. William Eteki Mbomoua, a distinguished former Secretary General of our Continental Organization.

The presence of all of you at this meeting, underlines a recognition of the necessity to seek a coordinated approach in addressing the problem of proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Africa and the importance of sharing experiences within the Continent, as well as among all those who are preoccupied with the problem globally. On behalf of the General Secretariat and on my own behalf, I wish to express appreciation for the positive response demonstrated by your attendance at this meeting.

I would like also to register our gratitude to the donors and partners who have assisted us in addressing this issue and who have contributed immensely to the convening of this meeting. I wish, in this regard, to acknowledge the respective support given by the Governments of the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland. Similarly, the collaborative relationship we have developed with the Pretoria based Institute for Security Studies as well as with the Lome based United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa has been quite useful in pursuing this undertaking.

This expert meeting convenes with a background of a determined preoccupation by the OAU in seeking ways of containing the proliferation of small arms and combating illicit trafficking and its adverse consequences to our societies. It is out of this concern that during its 68th Ordinary Session, held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in June 1998, the Council of Ministers adopted Decision CM/Dec. 432 (LXVIII) on the "Proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons". In that Decision, council, inter alia, reiterated the urgency and the need for Inter-African cooperation in the search for solutions to the problems posed by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and stressed the primary role that the OAU should play in the coordination of efforts in this area.

As a follow-up to the Ouagadougou Decision, the OAU, in collaboration with the Institute for Security Studies embarked on the

publication of a bi-monthly Newsletter, entitled " Small Arms Proliferation and Africa", aimed at sensitizing Member States and providing a forum of exchange of views on how best to address the problem of small arms and light weapons.

OAU's engagement with this issue was given an added impetus at the Algiers Summit, in 1999, whereby the Heads of State and Government adopted a Decision on the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons, in which it, inter alia, hailed the Declaration of the Moratorium on import, export and manufacture of light weapons adopted in Abuja, in October 1998, by the Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS; welcomed the initiatives being undertaken by Member States and regional Organizations; reiterated the urgency and the need for Inter-African Cooperation in addressing the problems associated with the illicit use, transfer and manufacture of small arms and light weapons; and requested the OAU Secretariat to organize a ministerial Conference preparatory to the United Nations Conference on the same topic scheduled to take place not later than 2001.

This expert meeting which will be followed up next month by a consultation meeting with NGOs, International Organizations, and the Secretariats of Regional Organizations will, I believe, go a long way to pave the way for a fruitful Ministerial Meeting to be held in Bamako, Mali, in October 2000.

The excessive and uncontrolled accumulation and circulation of small arms and light weapons has become a threat to peace processes and human security alike. This phenomenon knows no borders and affects the developed as well as developing communities. In crisis, in political transitions and in post-conflict reconstruction processes, the unaccounted, excessive and uncontrolled availability and movement of small arms and ammunition fuels violent alternatives to conflict resolution and creates real obstacles to peaceful economic and social development. Moreover, the increase in illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons is adding fuel to the problem by contributing to the increase in banditry, smuggling and similar criminal activities which not only imperil the lives of our security forces but also obstruct the day-to-day life of our peoples. The proliferation of small arms is a major cause in sustaining and compounding armed conflicts in this Continent.

Although this problem is clearly global in character and in linkages, its effects are felt most starkly in Africa. It is reported, for example, that out of the 500 million small arms circulating in the world, 100 million of these are found in Africa. And more than half of these have been illicitly procured. The consequences, as one can contemplate, include an increased wave of crime, burgeoning culture of violence, pervasive insecurity and instability in some of our societies, and even more tragically, the promotion of the phenomenon of child soldiers for whom such contraptions are found to be more convenient to handle.

I believe we are all aware of the havoc and the horror being perpetrated upon the people of Sierra Leone. In fact, the tragedy of Sierra Leone is an epitome of the devastation caused by these weapons. Not only do they foster and perpetuate violence and instability, but also they become a basis for obstructing the attainment of sustainable peace in society. In the same manner, the intractability of the crisis in Somalia, and the phenomenon of war-lordism is largely a consequence of the easy availability of these weapons.

It is in this regard that, the control and reduction of small arms and light weapons proliferation in Africa and the combating of the illicit trade in arms are issues of major concern for the OAU. They impinge on our efforts to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts; disrupt the social tranquility of our peoples; and they undermine the promotion of sustainable economic growth and development. In this respect, the issue of small arms and light weapons is not simply a security concern or a matter to be handled by law enforcement agencies. It is a problem that involves all sectors of society and at all levels. It concerns governments, private sector as well as civil society.

The task is far too great for any one group, government or sub-regional organization to undertake alone. Arms spill over from conflict to conflict, and they serve the greed and needs of criminals who recognize no borders. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons and the combating of the illicit trade in arms cannot be stopped without a coordinated, comprehensive approach to the prevention, management and resolution of the problem. All factors must be considered in such a strategy: from long term provision for socio-economic development of our people, to short term needs of improving border controls and police cooperation between all countries.

The need to enhance legal controls and regulations over licit arms whether belonging to the state or to individuals must come hand in hand with the need to improve border controls and exchange of information to crack down on criminal operators and illicit traffickers. We must neither forget nor abandon the urgency of arms removal campaigns that seek to reduce the number of illicit weapons impacting on societies today; nor underestimate the positive role of adequate demobilization and reintegration programmes which include disarmament. Lastly, we cannot afford to ignore the need to urge all manufacturers and traders in arms, particularly those in developed world, to tighten and control their operations, respect the ECOWAS moratorium, and to stop all illicit trading undertaken by their national including the brokering and transfer of illicit arms to Africa. Suppliers have a responsibility to account for their operations.

Arms will not be stopped by regulations alone but also by reducing the demand for them, particularly, that which is caused by insecurity. The prevalence of situations of insecurity and the breakdown of law and order

fosters a necessity to seek means of self-defense, privatization of security, and an excessive tendency to acquire weaponry. The worst degeneration of such situations is when communities are compelled to seek protection from gangs and warlords so as to ensure security. As we all know by now, that even if such a situation prevails in one part of our Continent, the devastating consequences affect a much wider area bordering such places.

More critical, is the need to find ways and means of developing a culture of peace in which tensions and divergences within our societies can be resolved through non-violent means. The experience of the past two decades amply demonstrates the futility of resorting to amassing arms and deploying them as a means of articulating and defending political or economic interests. No single conflict in our Continent has been resolved by the force of arms.

It is therefore encouraging to observe that the issue of small arms and light weapons is receiving prominent attention in the continent, and concrete steps are being taken to address it. The moratorium declared by ECOWAS Heads of State and Government, the efforts being deployed by President Konare to mobilize action about this problem both continentally and worldwide, as well as the meeting recently hosted by the Government of Kenya to address the problem of proliferation of small arms in the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa need to be fully supported.

Indeed, the commitment made by our Leaders at the Algiers Summit, to make the year 2000 as one of peace and security, entails that concerted efforts should be deployed to contain the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and to eradicate their negative effects in our societies. We, at the OAU remain fully committed to executing the task assigned to us by the Heads of State and Government. We will continue to work closely with Member States and our partners in developing a coordinated approach in addressing this problem.

I wish you success in your deliberations. I declare the First Continental Meeting of African Experts on Small Arms and Light Weapons open.

Thank you.