



Organization of African Unity

**STATEMENT BY
DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,
SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE OAU,
AT THE OPENING OF THE MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON
THE ILLICIT PROLIFERATION,
CIRCULATION AND TRAFFICKING
OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS IN AFRICA**

BAMAKO, MALI

30 NOVEMBER 2000

Your Excellency Alpha Oumar Konare, President of the Republic of Mali,

Honourable Ministers and Heads of Delegations,

**Distinguished UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs,
Ambassador J. Dhanapala,**

**Distinguished Chairman of the UN Conference Preparatory Committee,
Ambassador Carlos dos Santos,**

Distinguished Members of the Eminent Persons Group

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I wish to extend my warmest welcome to you all to this Ministerial Conference on the Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Africa. Your presence in Bamako, from all over the Continent and beyond, is an eloquent testimony of the serious concern that you attach to this issue of small arms and light weapons and the problems posed by the impact of their destructive use on our people.

I wish to thank the Government of Mali for inviting us and for creating the necessary conditions for the convening of the Conference. We are truly gratified for the warmth of the reception accorded to us in keeping with the traditional hospitality of the Malian people.

I also wish to express our gratitude to His Excellency Alpha Oumar Konare, President of the Republic of Mali, for his important contribution and leadership in addressing the problem of small arms and light weapons within Africa. Working within the Eminent Persons Group, which he co-chairs, President Konare has also been able to effectively project the gravity of this problem at a global level.

The decision to convene this Ministerial Conference here in Bamako is, indeed, a recognition of the commitment of the Government of the Republic of Mali to combating this problem. We do recall the example set by the Government of Mali in overseeing the destruction of thousands of small arms, at the historic "Flamme de la Paix" ceremony held in Timbuktu on 27 March 1996.

I also wish to acknowledge the support provided by our partners in this project, namely the Governments of the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. We are glad that their representatives have been able to join us here. Similarly, the collaborative relationship we have developed with the United Nations

Regional Center for Peace and Disarmament in Lome, and the Institute for Security Studies of Pretoria, has been pivotal in pursuing this endeavour and preparing for the Ministerial Conference.

The convening of this Conference testifies to Africa's determination and commitment to address the issue of small arms and light weapons. This is partly due to our recognition of the multifaceted serious implications that the current state of illicit proliferation of small arms poses for our countries and peoples. This conference, therefore, provides us with an opportunity to explore concrete ways of working with the rest of the world in the global efforts to address this issue through the elaboration and adoption of measures at national, regional and international levels. Such measures should have the effect of mitigating the impact of the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons on the lives of our population and their aspiration for peace, security and development in Africa.

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The OAU has, on numerous occasions, underscored the gravity of the problem and has persistently voiced Africa's concern. The Council of Ministers, meeting at its 68th Ordinary Session in Ouagadougou, in June 1998, adopted a decision on the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, in which it reiterated the urgency for inter-African cooperation. Subsequently, the 35th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government held in Algiers from 12 to 14 July 1999, adopted a decision on the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons. In that decision, the Assembly requested the General Secretariat to organize a Ministerial Conference in preparation to the United Nations Conference on Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons scheduled for 2001.

In the implementation of this mandate, the General Secretariat took a number of initiatives, including the convening in Addis Ababa in May 2000, of the first continental meeting of African experts on small arms and light weapons, and the international consultation on the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons in June 2000. Both these initiatives underlined the gravity of the problem and stressed the need for acting in a coordinated approach in tackling it.

Small arms and light weapons have several common characteristics that make them the weapons of choice in many African conflicts. They contribute to the destruction of the social fabric in many parts of the Continent, particularly where there are internal conflicts and the activities of non-state actors, criminal gangs and terrorist groups.

It is self evident that by themselves, small arms and light weapons do not cause conflicts. Yet their availability, particularly in conflict theaters, their relative ease to use, conceal or maintain, and their increasing lethality have

serious repercussions on Africa's efforts to promote peace, security and development.

We must recognize that the widespread availability of small arms and light weapons in Africa has also contributed to the development of a culture of violence, to massive violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, the aggravation of the plight of refugees and displaced persons besides causing millions of deaths and injuries among civilian populations. According to existing statistics, these weapons are presently responsible for 90% of war casualties, with 50% of these being civilians, 85% of whom are children.

The direct impact of small arms and light weapons on our people is clear. Indeed, the procurement of such arms accelerates armed conflicts, which in turn exacerbates the already worsening socio-economic conditions of our people. It is well known that the victims of such conflicts are innocent civilians often used as human shields or conscripted to join rebel armies. But, the more tragic consequences of such conflicts are their devastating effect on women and children who also constitute the majority of refugees and internally displaced persons in Africa.

Indeed, the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons has contributed to the emergence of the phenomenon of child soldiers in Africa, with the attendant psychosocial trauma and other consequences that have been identified with it. Our children are increasingly being conscripted and forced to join either of the warring factions in some of the conflicts in Africa. Often, they are drugged while in captivity and forced to commit torture and other dehumanizing acts to fellow children and other innocent civilians. In the process, they are denied of their rights to grow up as normal children and enjoy parental care and guidance. Tragically also the phenomenon of child soldiers is likely to deprive Africa of quality leadership for tomorrow. We, therefore, need to address these issues in a more systematic and pragmatic manner. That is why I would urge the Conference to bear in mind this distressing phenomenon of child soldiers in Africa as you endeavour to adumbrate the African Common Position. Indeed, it is important for the world at large to come to a consensus on how best to address this issue.

Across the Continent, criminal activities are on the rise as a result of the easy availability of small arms and light weapons. Considerable damage has been inflicted on our productive systems and economic development as well as undermining the consolidation of the democratization process in Africa.

Several factors have contributed to the widespread availability of small arms and light weapons on the Continent. Chief among them is an increased supply, both in terms of an expansion of the number of producers and the release of large numbers of stockpiles, especially in the period following the end of the Cold War. In turn, this situation has led to the rapid development of the illicit proliferation and trafficking in these weapons of death. On the other hand, and as a result of the proliferation and escalation of armed conflicts in some parts of the Continent, particularly, in areas experiencing internal

conflicts, there has been an increasing demand for small arms and light weapons.

**Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

There is no doubt that Africa is the Continent that has greatly suffered from the destructive impact of small arms and light weapons. Any viable strategy, therefore, requires a global approach to deal with both the supply and the demand sides of the issue. Africa should remain at the forefront of efforts aimed at finding a lasting solution to the problem of the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons. African States should seize this opportunity to define a strong and coherent African Common Position in the areas of prevention, reduction, control and eradication of the illicit proliferation, transfer of small arms and light weapons.

It is my hope and expectation that in the elaboration of the African Common Position to the UN Conference, we will draw inspiration from key initiatives undertaken within the Continent. These initiatives include those undertaken by our regional organizations. I have in mind, for example, the initiatives taken in West Africa, Southern Africa, the countries of the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region as well as Central Africa. In West Africa, ECOWAS adopted on 31st October 1998, a three-year renewable Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Light Weapons in West Africa. The Moratorium came into effect on 1 November 1998. As a follow-up to the adoption of this voluntary arms restraint measures, ECOWAS Heads of State signed, on 10 December 1999, a Code of Conduct for the implementation of the Moratorium. The Moratorium will come up for renewal in October 2001.

In Southern Africa, special mention should be made of bilateral initiatives, such as "Operation Rachel" between Mozambique and South Africa. This initiative has been set up to find and destroy weapons left over from the long civil war in Mozambique. Prominent regional initiatives in this region include progress made in the cooperation at the level of SADC and the Southern African Regional Police Chiefs Cooperation Organization. Progress has also been made in the efforts to institutionalize SADC Protocol on Small Arms, and the preparation by SADC Member States of the Protocol on small arms, which is due to be considered by SADC Heads of State and Government at their next Summit.

The countries of the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region have adopted the Nairobi Declaration on the problem of the proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons in the region. In Central Africa, initiatives have also been undertaken within the framework of the UN Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa. This includes the convening in N'djamena, Chad, in October 1999, of a sub-regional Conference on the proliferation and illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons in Central Africa.

All these initiatives testify to the commitment of the African countries to address the problem within the Continent. The initiatives are also an expression of the determination of Africa to contribute to the global efforts towards combating the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons. Indeed, we in Africa, recognize the global nature of the problem. We also realize the requirements of a coordinated approach to the problem. We see the imperative need for the building of new partnership in combating the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons as a necessary condition for success in this endeavour.

It was with this in mind that the Algiers Summit welcomed the work of the United Nations, through its Group of Experts on Small Arms and the Draft Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition. The Recommendations of the Group of Government Experts on Small Arms and the Report of the Group of Experts on the problems of ammunitions and explosives address in a comprehensive manner the nature of the problem.

This Ministerial Conference to the UN Conference should also benefit from the presence of some members of the Eminent Persons Group which was established in 1999 and is presently Co-Chaired by President Alpha Oumar Konare and the former Prime Minister of France, Mr. Michel Rocard. I am indeed grateful to the members of the Eminent Persons Group who are among us today and I count on their valuable contribution to the deliberations of this Conference.

Africa's capacity to manufacture small arms and light weapons is limited. Yet, Africa is the largest recipient of small arms and light weapons. In Africa, the theater of illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons has provided lucrative trade for the merchants of war who have perfected the illicit exchange of small arms and light weapons with Africa's natural resources. The deadly barter trade of small arms and light weapons with diamonds has made it easier for rebel movements within the Continent to fuel and sustain the war machine with devastating effect on the populations. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that most of the conflicts raging on the Continent would have ended much earlier and that the various cease-fire agreements would have been holding if the illicit exchange of small arms and light weapons with diamonds and other natural resources did not exist. It is imperative to put an end to such trade. Given the political will, which so far is lacking on the part of those who have the capacity to make a decisive contribution to end this lucrative trade in death and destruction, this objective can be achieved.

On the supply side, we must be able to address the expansion of the number of producers and the release of large numbers of stockpiles. We should call for the identification of concrete steps to promote global norms and ensure greater transparency and accountability in arms transfers. In working towards this endeavour, concrete and reinforceable measures should be

established to deal with all the linkages associated with the proliferation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons.

While we should work towards concrete positive movement on the supply side, we should, at the same time, strive to remove the conditions that promote the demand for such weapons in our Continent. The establishment in 1993 of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution is a step in that direction. In this regard, efforts must be intensified to redress the underlying causes of conflict in some parts of the Continent and promote measures towards the achievement of sustainable peace and development.

The UN Conference should therefore, help to forge a new partnership towards a world free of illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons. For us in Africa, experience in the past has clearly shown that when united around a strong common position, we can make a difference. The example of the Ottawa process is still vivid in our minds, as it was the strong cohesion of the African Group in Oslo which greatly contributed to the adoption of the Treaty banning antipersonnel mines during the September 1997 Oslo diplomatic Conference. The campaign against the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons requires the same degree of cohesion and action to succeed.

I thank you for your attention.