

9 July 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
at the United Nations Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms
and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects**

I should like to warmly congratulate you on your election as the President of the Conference. I am confident that with your experience and wisdom, you will be able to guide this important Conference to a successful outcome.

Today, the international community gathers in this Hall to mount a collective response to the challenge to international peace and security, posed by the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects. The holding of this conference reflects our collective awareness of the severity of the problems associated with this illicit trade, as well as our determination to solve them with a Programme of Action to be concluded at this Conference.

This conference is also an important part of the follow-up to the Millennium Summit. Last September, our Heads of State and Government resolved to take action to end illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, especially by making arms transfers more transparent and supporting regional disarmament measures, taking account of the recommendations of this conference. We must therefore show similar resolve in turning the commitments of the Summit Declaration into reality.

It is important to note that joint efforts by the United Nations, Governments and civil society have moved the issue of small arms to the centre of the international agenda in a matter of just a few years, a relatively short period in multilateral disarmament. It was only in 1995 that the UN Secretary-General brought to the world's attention the effects from the enormous proliferation of small arms and light weapons and made his plea for microdisarmament. For its part, the General Assembly quickly adopted, in 1997 and 1999, two governmental experts' reports on the issue. The Assembly also agreed to hold this Conference as the next step in solving the problems detailed in those reports.

In its action to date, the United Nations has made it clear that the uncontrolled spread and easy availability of small arms and light weapons currently kills more than 500,000 people each year in wars, civil strife, and crime. It sustains and exacerbates armed conflicts. It endangers peacekeepers and humanitarian workers. It undermines respect for international humanitarian law. It disrupts social, political and economic development. It causes the displacement of millions of innocent people. It threatens legitimate but weak governments and benefits terrorists as well as the perpetrators of organized crime.

The international community has realized that in order to prevent conflict, and sustain peace and development, this burning issue must be addressed urgently. The illicit trade in small arms and light weapons must be ultimately eradicated. Global norms and a programme of action at the national, sub-regional, regional and global level must be put in place to prevent these weapons from accumulating at excessive and destabilizing levels and falling into the wrong hands.

This Conference provides an opportunity for the international community to agree to an effective Programme of Action. It must contain unambiguous political commitments and practical and firm measures. A vigorous follow-up mechanism with broad scope is crucial for effective implementation and further development of the Programme of Action.

People all over the world are looking to this Conference for meaningful steps towards enhancing human security and preventing further suffering and destruction of life. I urge all participating States to build on the hard work to date of Governments, sub-regional and regional organizations, the UN system and its agencies, and civil society. We must now demonstrate the maximum political will for the common good of all people and especially those who have suffered immensely from the illicit trade in small arms and who will continue to suffer if immediate action is not taken.

I thank you.