

PREFACE

Conventional weapons, especially small arms and light weapons, are taking a heavy toll in human lives in conflicts today, particularly internal warfare. The UN Secretary General reports¹ that women and children account for nearly 80 percent of the casualties resulting from the use of small arms. By 1988, as many as 200,000 children under the age of 16 were estimated to have participated in conflicts in 25 countries and, since then, this situation has worsened.

Speaking at the General Assembly in September 1997, Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Honourable Lloyd Axworthy, highlighted the importance of small arms issues:

"Landmines are not the only complex, cross-cutting problem to be addressed if we are to reduce or prevent conflict. All too often it is small arms, rather than the weapons systems targeted by disarmament efforts, that cause the greatest bloodshed today. In the hands of terrorists, criminals and the irregular militia and armed bands typical of internal conflict, these are true weapons of mass terror. As with landmines, their victims are all too often civilians. In addition, small arms proliferation undermines the security and development efforts of many developing countries."

Given the complexity of small arms issues, there is no simple single solution. Consequently, the focus of any international effort on small arms should be a multi-track series of coordinated efforts at the regional and global levels. These should address in an integrated fashion the development, arms control, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, crime, culture and terrorism dimensions of the issue. Three generic objectives for action on small arms issues can be identified:

- 1) suppression of the illicit transfer of small arms,
- 2) management, tracking and transparency in regard to the legal trade in small arms, and
- 3) practical disarmament efforts in pre- and post-conflict situations.

Without doubt, thinking about how to address small arms issues remains at a very preliminary stage. More research is necessary to explore the scope of the problem as well as potential measures to ameliorate it.

¹ Report of the United Nations Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms, A/52/298, 27 August 1997, p. 2 and 10.