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To : Claude Romer, Chief, Safety Promotion and Injury Prevention, WHO, Geneva

From : Antoine Chapdelaine, WHO Expert and Focal point on firearms violence and injury prevention
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Subject : United Nations 3rd Americas Regional Workshop on Firearm Regulation for the Purposes of Crime Prevention and Public Safety in Sao Paulo, Brazil, 8-12 December 1997

Purpose : Background for the Asian Regional Workshop on Firearm Regulation for the Purposes of Crime Prevention and Public Safety in New Delhi, India, 27-31 January 1998, with recommendations .

INTRODUCTION

Before going to this meeting in Sao Paulo Brazil, the WHO representative was acutely aware that in the Americas (South+Central+North America), there are over 100,000 lives lost to bullets each year. The costs of gunshot injuries and deaths are also significant. For example, in Canada alone, the annual economic cost of the misuse of firearms has been estimated at \$6.6 billion (in 1993 Canadian dollars)¹.

Despite the mounting interest in preventing and controlling violent injury since the success of the land mine treaty, the goal with guns is different from land mines, as we cannot ban small arms such as revolvers, pistols and other light weapons that the police, security guards and hunters legally carry all over the world. The stakes in firearm injury prevention world wide concern on one hand : post conflict small arms proliferation and on the other ; firearms kept at home for legitimised purposes, but misused in domestic and interpersonal violence, in suicides, in « accidents » involving children also.

A public health perspective strategy would be to consider all firearms injuries and deaths, notwithstanding the particular circumstances (wars, terrorism, conflicts, crimes, domestic violence, suicide, « accidents », etc.) in which they occur. The problem has one factor in common : the **inappropriate discharge of an accessible firearm**. Therefore, small arms control between nations is no different from firearms injury prevention within nations. An effort to regulate the circulation of firearms for controlling domestic use and international movement, should ensure better safety and health of individuals and groups within boundaries and the control of the licit and illicit transit of firearms across boundaries.

PUBLIC HEALTH BACKGROUND

Access to firearms is the key

Extensive research has established a correlation between *access* to guns and risk of death and injury². The mere presence of a firearm in a home increases the risk of suicide³ (4.8 times), of homicide⁴ (2.7 times) and of "accident"⁵, over a home where there are no guns.

¹Miller T. Costs associated with gunshot wounds in Canada in 1991, Can Med Ass J, 1995; 153 (9): 1261-1268.

²Kellermann A.L., Lee R.K., Mercy J.A., Banton J.: The epidemiologic basis for the prevention of firearm injuries. Annu. Rev. Public Health 1991; 12:17-40, p.30 and 31.

³Kellermann, A.L., Rivara, F.P., Somes, G., et al.: Suicide in the Home in Relation to Gun Ownership. New England Journal of Medecine 1992 Aug 13; 327(7):467-472.

⁴Kellermann, A.L., Rivara, F.P., Rushforth, N.B. et al.: Gun Ownership as a risk factor for homicide in the Home. New England Journal of Medecine 1993; 329(15):1084-1091.