Plenary Contribution to IPPNW Conference “Aiming for Prevention:
International Medical Conference on Small Arms, Gun Violence, and Injury.”
Helsinki, Finland, 28-30 September 2001

Mr. João Honwana, Chief, Conventional Arms Branch, Department of Disarmament Affairs, United Nations

Let me start by thanking the IPPNW for inviting me here, and in particular Brian Rawson for relentlessly insisting that I should come.

I am told that between 80 and 100 medical doctors and other health professionals, and 20 medical students have attended this conference. For somebody who comes from a remote village in the global South, where doctors and medical professionals command a great deal of respect, the opportunity to address this audience is indeed a great privilege.

I say this not to flatter the audience but simply to highlight that in vast areas of the developing world, medical professionals can play an important role as agents for social change, given their influence and the esteem in which they are held within the communities they serve. I also believe that the establishment and strengthening of disarmament constituencies, particularly in the most affected areas, constitutes a significant contribution to the global efforts to curb and eradicate the proliferation and misuse of illicit small arms and light weapons. It is therefore particularly encouraging to see members of the medical profession organizing themselves to join such constituencies and undertake the implementation of the Program of Action adopted at the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in all its Aspects.

I would like to take this opportunity to brief you on the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, the most salient features of the outcome document, and the follow up to the conference.

Overview of the negotiations at the Conference

As you will recall, the conference had a high level segment at the Ministerial level during the first week, when it heard statements by representatives of 135 countries, and a number of regional organizations and UN bodies, including the Coordinating Action on Small Arms (CASA) mechanism. Among the speakers were the Vice-President of Colombia, the Vice Prime-Minister of Cambodia, 47 Ministers and 21 Vice-ministers. This high level of representatives of Member States clearly signalled that the international community accords a high priority to addressing the challenge of illicit small arms and light weapons.
The participation of civil society both in the preparatory process and the conference itself was also of great significance. 42 NGOs from all continents presented statements at the conference, representing a wide range of perspectives, from those closely associated with the pro-gun lobby, to the most openly opposed to it. This high degree of inclusiveness allowed for a rich and frank discussion of the issues under consideration, both inside the conference room and in the many side events organized during the conference.

Also during the first week, the President of the Conference conducted informal consultations, with the assistance of 3 of his Vice-Presidents, namely, Ambassadors Carlos dos Santos of Mozambique, Michael Weston of the UN, and Rakesh Sood, of India. On the basis of the draft Programme of Action recommended by the Preparatory Committee and the outcome of these informal consultations, the President proposed a revised version of the Programme of Action (L5) at the beginning of the second week.

By Thursday, 19 July 2001, under the skilful steering of the President, delegations had reached agreement on most paragraphs in the Programme of Action. The remaining difficult issues were: the concept of excessive and destabilizing accumulation of small arms and light weapons, the right to self-determination, prohibition of transfers to non-state actors, restrictions on civilian ownership, transparency on arms transfers, negotiations on legally-binding instruments, export criteria for small arms, surplus indicators, and the follow-up to the Conference.

The President negotiated these remaining issues with concerned delegations and secured consensus language on all but two topics: transfers to non-state actors, and restrictions on civilian possession. When it became evident that the deadlock might lead the Conference to a failure, a compromise was reached to drop these topics from the text of the Programme of Action. Most delegations, African countries in particular, expressed deep disappointment and dismay over this.

**Overview of the Programme of Action adopted at the Conference**

The Conference was a success in that a Programme of Action was agreed by consensus despite misgivings over the weakness in some of the language. The Programme of Action will now become a good basis for future action by the international community against the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons.

States have committed themselves, through the Programme of Action, to develop, strengthen and implement agreed norms and measures at all levels to prevent, combat and
eradicate the illicit manufacturing of and trade in small arms and light weapons, with special emphasis on post-conflict situations, and to act responsibly in the areas of export, import, transit and retransfer of small arms and light weapons.

States have also committed themselves to take a wide range of measures, including to formulate or strengthen national legislation and administrative procedures to exercise effective control over the manufacture, export, import, transit, brokering of small arms and light weapons and to criminalize the illicit activities, to apply unique marking on and accurate record-keeping of each weapon so as to enable its timely identification and tracing, to destroy illicit or surplus weapons as necessary and to enhance transparency in general.

States agreed to support national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes, to further enhance cooperation among themselves at the regional and international levels in tracing and identifying the illicit arms and rendering assistance by states, regional and international organizations to the affected states in addressing the illicit trade of small arms and light weapons.

States further agreed to strengthen cooperation and partnerships at all levels among themselves, international and regional organizations, and civil society including NGOs to ensure coordination, complementarity and synergy in efforts to tackle the problem.

The follow up

The Programme of Action calls for the convening of a review conference no later than in 2006, and for a biennial meeting of States starting in 2003. It encourages the UN and other international organizations to undertake initiatives to promote its implementation. It requests the Secretary-General, through DDA, to collate and circulate data and information provided by States on a voluntary basis and including national reports, on implementation of the Programme of Action. It also requests the Secretary-General to conduct a UN study aimed at examining the feasibility of developing an international instrument on identifying and tracing illicit small arms and light weapons.

In other words, the Programme of Action provides for a follow-up process to the conference. And, to return to my starting point, I believe that the medical profession can play a significant role in that process. The ideas and proposal discussed here over the last 2 days clearly indicate IPPNW’s commitment to move in that direction. I wish you every success in your endeavours.

Thank you very much.