Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Finnish Government I wish to welcome all participants to this International Medical Conference on small arms, gun violence and injury organized by International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War with its Finnish affiliate, Physicians for Social Responsibility. Finland and Helsinki are glad to host this important conference that brings together more than 200 experts in different fields of medical research and public health as well as representatives of non-governmental organizations.

The whole civilized world was shocked by the terrorist attacks in the United States. These fanatical acts were condemned worldwide. I am sure that we all wish to pay tribute to the rescue workers and health workers toiling to help, or just find, the victims. The international community intends to step up its efforts in the fight against terrorism. Enhanced cooperation is needed to prevent terrorists and terrorist organizations from acquiring weapons, either conventional weapons or weapons of mass destruction. Weapons proliferation continues to be a major security concern in the world.

In recent years, the issue of small arms and light weapons has become one of international concern. It is not a new issue, but a neglected one. Questions related to the illegal trade in and the destabilizing accumulation of small arms are now being placed on the agendas of multilateral disarmament talks in various forums.

As we know, the majority of casualties in modern armed conflicts are caused by small arms and light weapons. Victims are in most cases unarmed civilians: men, women and children. More than 90 per cent of all casualties in conflict situations are non-combatants. It is fair to say that the assault rifle has become the weapon of mass killing. According to some estimates, over 500 million small arms and light weapons are currently in circulation throughout the world.

Human rights, sustainable development, public health and humanitarian assistance are all affected by the proliferation of small arms. Deaths and injuries are the most visible consequences. The accumulation of small arms can seriously impede post-conflict rehabilitation and threaten the lives of humanitarian and development workers.

It is in our common interest that his threat to peace, human security and post-conflict
recovery be firmly dealt with, not forgetting the inherent complexity of the issue. In many cases small arms trigger a circle of violence. We need to tackle the roots of the problem, including age-old habits and attitudes as well as urgent concrete needs.

The Program of Action adopted by the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, in July this year, defines the future tasks. We must act in many fields – disarmament, peacekeeping, peace-building, combating organized crime, holding producer and user States responsible – and all this must be done at all levels: national, regional and global.

International cooperation should aim, above all, at finding practical solutions to real-life problems.

The EU has emphasized the need to address the problem of small arms as part of a long term process, with particular focus on:

- Reducing the availability of small arms in areas of conflict or potential conflict, by promoting strict export controls and safe destruction of surplus weapons
- Promoting a series of measures which will limit the demand for small arms in areas of conflict and
- Helping affected governments to deal with all aspects of the problem.

Another urgent need is to establish a comprehensive international set of norms governing the legal trade in small arms and light weapons.

Arms exporting countries have a particular responsibility to ensure that the small arms and light weapons they export do not end up in the hands of those, whether Governments or other bodies, who violate human rights and international humanitarian law. It is estimated that 50 per cent of legally traded small arms and light weapons end upon the illicit market.

More transparency about legal trade is necessary. In Finland, for example, even individual military arms export permits are accessible to the interested public.

The decommissioning and collection of small arms in post-conflict situations should be given priority as part of peace support operations. But it is not enough simply to collect weapons, ammunition and explosives. They should be destroyed as quickly as possible in order to reduce the risk of conflict breaking out again.

The contribution of the representatives of other organizations and NGOs are highly appreciated in this context. The active contribution of NGOs in the humanitarian, development, human rights, and health sectors need to make their expertise and experience available to alleviate the human costs of small arms and to push for a reduction in the supply and demand of small arms.
The IPPNW, together with the rest of the NGO network, contributed in a concrete way to the fairly satisfactory outcome of the UN small arms conference. In order to evaluate the health problems posed by small arms, reliable data is needed. As first-hand witnesses to violence, you medical professionals have a lot of experience acquired in the field. This conference provides a great opportunity to share that collective experience.

The timing of the IPPNW Conference is very suitable in that it contributes to the follow-up process of the UN Conference and other small arms deliberations in the OSCE and EU framework as well as other valuable regional initiatives.

The aim of this Conference is to advance medical research, strengthen practical medical involvement in community education and in political advocacy, and generate a medical “call to action” on small arms. I wish you every success in achieving these goals.