

Preface

Illicit trafficking in small arms and sensitive technologies is not a new phenomenon in itself, but has acquired new dimensions and urgency with the end of the cold war.

Small arms, in many regions of the world, are the weapons which cause the largest numbers of casualties and human suffering. As factors of instability, they are also obstacles to development in its economic, social and political aspects. The widespread use of small arms has become a characteristic feature of the mostly internal wars waged in the 1990s. Stemming the illicit possession and traffic of such weapons is a particularly arduous task, especially in regions where international borders are difficult to control effectively. In such cases, the supply of relatively inexpensive small arms follows the ebb and flow of conflict and evades national control. Countries where wars are or have been fought are plagued by large amounts of uncontrolled weapons held by fighters, ex-combatants and civilians. Arms dealers operating in illicit markets to provide weapons to individuals, warring factions or criminal groups, constitute a key challenge for future controls. The role of intelligence services, border controls and other uniformed forces is crucial in this respect.

Weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and sensitive technologies have long been a focus of various international control regimes. But some of the technologies for nuclear weapons, chemical agents or ballistic missiles for example, have become “old technology” rather than “high technology”. As such, they are increasingly prone to illicit acquisition. In addition, the recent speed of the information revolution has resulted in more recent knowledge and its technological applications being much more accessible than in the past.

Since the 1990s, the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction and their associated technologies by non-State actors has become a growing source of concern. With the sarin attack on the Tokyo subway, the use of chemical warfare agents by a terrorist group against a civilian population has become reality rather than a nightmare scenario. Attempts to engage in the illicit traffic of nuclear materials have also increased spectacularly, and the small size of the equipment needed to produce and store biological warfare agents makes them a priority focus for future control arrangements.

The threat posed by the illicit possession and dissemination of both small arms and sensitive technologies is in essence a shared and global threat. No State, no city, no population can consider itself immune to the consequences of a breach of control anywhere else in the world. As such, it is a problem which necessarily calls for the rigorous adaptation and implementation of national controls, as well as for close, purposeful and effective international cooperation.

It is in this spirit that the April 1997 Buenos Aires seminar on *Illicit Traffic in Small Arms and Sensitive Technologies* was designed to promote open and constructive debates on issues in which all participants had clear and common interests.

Geneva, April 1997

Dr Christophe Carle
Deputy Director
UNIDIR