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**Achieving Small Arms Control
Remarks by Ambassador Thomas Graham, Jr.
September 25, 1998 -- The United Nations, New York**

The world is becoming an increasingly dangerous place due to the spread of weapons. Weapons of mass destruction threaten human civilization in unprecedented ways. Small arms proliferation also threatens human civilization as access to weapons becomes more easy and widespread, but in perhaps a more insidious way, often from within states. Many governments, however, are becoming increasingly sensitive to this problem.

During my travels in support of indefinite extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), many of my interlocutors from other countries stressed the importance of curtailing the international transfer of small arms. Often they would say we agree with you about the importance of a permanent NPT, now let us talk about what is of greatest concern to us. They identified the diffusion of small arms as a threat to their national security in the same way the United States views the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to its national security. Illegal transfers of weapons have become a security concern for an increasing number of countries .

In South Africa illegal import and export of conventional weapons is a central security concern. In Mexico, a flood of illegal weapons from the United States is closely associated with the drug trade and serves as an impetus to

widespread lawlessness. Peru has been deeply concerned with this issue. Norway has made a useful proposal for curtailing indiscriminate weapons transfers. But key supplier states like the United States, Russia, and China are not as quick to identify the problem as a threat to their own security interests and a reason to act. This is a short-sighted view. It will be important for the world community to develop criteria for determining which types of small arms may legitimately be part of international commerce -- for example, there does not appear to be any justification for items such as AK-47s ever to be part of international trade unless destined for recipients such as military establishments. Even more important is the need for more international cooperation to retard illegal trade in weapons. As Ambassador Moreno has said, the Organization of American States agreement is an important step forward. The International Code of Conduct is also promising.

In the United States, for instance, nearly 36,000 people reportedly died from firearm related injuries in 1995. It is incomprehensible for many around the world that the United States is not more proactive in controlling small arms in light of the tragedy occurring within our own country every day. However, it is a characteristic of the American political culture that what is referred to as "gun control" -- limitations on the weapons available to individuals -- is very controversial and politically difficult. It is important to the success of effective small arms control in the short term that it be de-linked from the political fate of gun control in the United States.

Arms control can be defined as efforts to establish negotiated limits, reductions, controls, or prohibitions on the development, testing, deployment, or use of weapons or weapons systems or essential component materials. Modern arms control has focused primarily on limiting weapons that destabilize the military balance of power among states. However, the lessons

learned in strategic arms control could open doors for employing arms control to achieve other objectives, such as controlling small arms, but major exporters like the United States, Russia, and China must be involved if such controls are to be effective.

Effective arms control is cooperative arms control. Charles de Gaulle once said that “treaties are like roses and young girls -- they last while they last.” This is a colorful remark, but it does express a fundamental and inescapable truth with regard to arms control treaties. Only treaties that are in the interest of all parties can be negotiated and only treaties that remain in the interest of all parties will be honored. It is essential to remember that arms control is not an end in itself; it is not a moral good the way peace is. Arms control, at its best, is an essential component of national security policy in the modern age. A treaty will not take away the evil in men’s hearts, but in recognizing this we should see the opportunities treaties do afford us, to define unacceptable behavior and connect those behaviors to the threat of unacceptable consequences for an offender.

The conclusion of the landmine treaty demonstrated the impact that civil society, and non-governmental organizations in particular, can have in promoting legal restraints on the spread of weapons. Like landmines, the global diffusion of small arms, when considered as a whole, is comparable to the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction, but the individual weapons may be more difficult to control. As in the case of landmines, this is not a cause to give up on arms control, however, because the establishment of global norms coupled with the elimination of large scale illicit production and transfer can be very valuable.

It is a commonly understood characteristic of arms control agreements that total bans on activities or items are more readily enforceable than quantitative limits, this understanding was taken into account in the Ottawa negotiations, however in the case of small arms control it may

be useful to treat the implementation of agreements as a hybrid of arms control and law enforcement. Verification and enforcement play an important roles in keeping treaty compliance in the interest of all parties by raising the potential costs of violation. Increased international cooperation in these areas holds considerable promise, but with regard to agreements limiting small arms traffic, perfect verification and enforcement may be much more difficult than with regard to treaties that limit strategic weapons. However, perfect enforcement may not be nearly so important if an individual treaty violation has no impact on the strategic balance. In the area of nuclear arms control, 99% confidence that your opponent is not cheating is often not considered sufficient. However, even 50% confidence that an opponent is not employing a weapon that causes superfluous injury may still be beneficial to both sides. Even if a treaty regime limiting such weapons is imperfect, it may be a factor that lessens the destructiveness of conflict.

In endeavoring to control a certain type of weapon, it is often important to realize that the weapon itself may not be the most viable target of effective arms control. For example, in the case of chemical weapons, it is important to focus not only on complete weapons but also on precursor chemicals that can be used in their manufacture. This may be a useful approach for small arms, since restriction of access to ammunition may limit the destructiveness of weapons already in dangerous hands.

Export controls are becoming more and more critical to controlling other dangerous materials and technologies. The kind of enhanced international cooperation, national legislation, and local implementation programs that many countries are engaged in to control nuclear, chemical, biological, missile, and precision-guidance technologies could readily be extended to cover small arms and ammunition. This should be seriously considered.

Perhaps the most important lesson strategic arms control offers for limiting small arms traffic is not to give up on a good idea just because it is difficult. A negotiated end to the superpower nuclear arms race seemed impossible for decades, and now the United States and Russia are working to dismantle nuclear weapons. A Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty was an objective of every U.S. Administration since Eisenhower, but it did not become possible until 1996. No one could have predicted the changes in the international political environment of the last ten years and there is no reason to believe the next ten years will be any more predictable. Only imagination and perseverance will allow us to take advantage of opportunities no one anticipates.

The world community is moving toward the establishment of a tighter and tighter web of interlocking legal regimes which serve to reinforce each other by raising the price of violation of any of the international norms they embody. The rule of law among sovereign states means more today than it ever has in history and its role is increasing constantly, but it is far from supreme. Treaties are not scripture; academic debates that insist that a treaty must be perfect or be considered useless are counterproductive. The perfect should not be allowed to be the enemy of the good when human life and suffering are at stake.