

UNIDIR/2001/23

## **Disarmament as Humanitarian Action**

**A discussion on the occasion of the  
20th anniversary of the  
United Nations Institute  
for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR)**



UNIDIR  
United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research  
Geneva, Switzerland

## NOTE

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## FOREWORD

The United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) was established in 1980 by a General Assembly resolution. Our mandate is to (a) provide the international community with more diversified and complete data on problems relating to international security, the armaments race and disarmament in all fields, particularly in the nuclear field, so as to facilitate progress, through negotiations, towards greater security for all States and towards the economic and social development of all peoples; (b) promote informed participation by all States in disarmament efforts; (c) assist ongoing negotiations on disarmament and continuing efforts to ensure greater international security at a progressively lower level of armaments, particularly nuclear armaments, by means of objective and factual studies and analyses; and (d) carry out more in-depth, forward-looking and long-term research on disarmament, so as to provide a general insight to the problems involved, and stimulating new initiatives for new negotiations.

In discussing how to mark the twentieth anniversary of UNIDIR in 2000, we decided to focus on the forward-looking aspects of our mandate, particularly with a view to stimulating new initiatives. During the last few years, little progress has been made in disarmament. The Conference on Disarmament in Geneva has not been able to agree a work programme and begin negotiations for several years. Various other processes, multilateral and bilateral, have been equally stuck. One explanation put forward for this state of affairs is that governments and civil society have lost sight of the disastrous humanitarian impact of the use of weapons, be they weapons of mass destruction or small arms used repeatedly and causing massive destruction of populations. In the 1990s the disarmament community joined forces with the humanitarian and development communities to tackle the terrible destructive effects of landmines, producing the 1997 Ottawa Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction. Since then there has been a fledgling dialogue on the humanitarian impact of small arms and light weapons, bringing together actors from the human rights, humanitarian, health, development and disarmament communities. This dialogue is growing in volume and power. There now needs to be a connection made between these communities on other weapons systems. A biological weapons attack would be a terrible

humanitarian disaster. As for the use of tactical or strategic nuclear weapons, their impact on human beings does not bear thinking about.

Thanks to the generous funding of the United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs (DDA), UNIDIR has begun a process of engaging the humanitarian communities in the disarmament debates. Our hope is to rekindle the passion required to bring about a safer and more secure world of humanity. We think that part of that process would be helped by reminding technical disarmament experts of the dire need for arms limitation and disarmament and by bringing the issue of disarmament back into the world of humanitarian action where it truly belongs.

We are immensely grateful to our speakers, Randall Forsberg, Martin Griffiths and Soren Jessen-Peterson for participating in this event in New York. I should like to thank the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament, Jayantha Dhanapala, for his thoughtful and intellectual input into our project as well as his department's financial support. For his support and brainstorming my thanks go to Christophe Carle, UNIDIR's Deputy Director. Thanks are also due to Michael Cassandra and Randy Rydell of DDA for their support and inputs. Special thanks go to Jackie Seck of UNIDIR for all the thinking and work she did in pulling together this seminar and report. Gratitude too to Lieta Alip of DDA for her sterling work on the transcript and to Isabelle Roger, UNIDIR's Administrative Assistant, and Mary Eschen of DDA for their work in organizing this meeting and finally to Anita Blétry of UNIDIR for seeing this report through to publication.

I want also to express my gratitude for having had the privilege of holding the post of Director on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of UNIDIR and to pay tribute to all the members of the UNIDIR Board of Trustees and to the former UNIDIR directors, Liviu Bota, Jayantha Dhanapala and Sverre Lodgaard, for their parts in bringing UNIDIR to the place it now occupies in the disarmament debate.

Patricia Lewis  
Director  
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## PREFACE

The United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), a product of the first Special Session of the General Assembly on Disarmament, turned twenty in 2000. To mark this event, the United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs (DDA)<sup>1</sup> and UNIDIR hosted a forward-looking discussion meeting on future disarmament challenges. We chose the subject, disarmament as humanitarian action, because we believe that the humanitarian benefits of disarmament have gone unrecognized for too long. The overall purpose of this meeting was to show that disarmament—whether of weapons of mass destruction or small arms—is first and foremost a question of human security, and thus a part of humanitarian action.

In the past two decades, UNIDIR has grown into a respected institution, known around the globe for its independent and high-quality research. UNIDIR has shown that it can adapt its research agenda to meet the requirements of changing times without falling victim to passing intellectual fashions. It has risen to the challenge of producing high-quality work on the subject of small arms precisely at a time when such research is most needed. It has explored disarmament problems facing new and evolving technologies such as those relating to weapons in outer space, the potential for misusing biotechnology for weapons purposes, the new challenge of information technology warfare, and rapidly evolving problems associated with the proliferation of missiles and missile defence capabilities. And just as the agenda has been evolving, so have the research methods adopted by UNIDIR. These include increased networking with non-governmental organizations, cooperation with regional and international institutions around the world, and the productive use of modern electronic communication techniques. In short, the Institute has kept up with the times, both substantively and methodologically. UNIDIR owes its success to its previous directors (Livi Bota, Jayantha Dhanapala, Sverre Lodgaard), to its current management team (Patricia Lewis and Christophe Carle), and to its small but dedicated staff.

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<sup>1</sup> UNIDIR gratefully acknowledges the financial support of DDA for this project.

A twentieth anniversary, it seems, is a time for some serious reflection. As a research institute, UNIDIR wanted something that was more philosophical in its approach and forward-looking. UNIDIR and DDA organized this seminar to reflect on the following issues: Why are we interested in disarmament? Why are we trying to achieve disarmament? What is at the core of disarmament? Whether we talk about small arms, machetes, biological weapons or nuclear weapons, they are all manifestations of the same thing, that is, humanity's violent response to conflict. We care about disarmament because we care about the security of people. And we want to put that back into the disarmament agenda. Humanitarian concerns and human rights are really at the heart of disarmament, peace and security. The humanitarian sector, the human rights sector, the development sector and the disarmament sector all need to work together. We need to mainstream disarmament to put it back in its rightful place: at the core of our thinking on people-centred security. Disarmament is humanitarian action.

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## **HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN AN INCREASINGLY MILITARIZED ENVIRONMENT**

**Soren Jessen-Petersen\***

During the last decade, humanitarian action has played a central role in some of the most dramatic crises. Just recall Iraq, the Great Lakes region, and Kosovo. During the same period, the environment in which humanitarian actors performed dramatically changed. The nature of wars evolved from conflicts between States, to conflicts within States with growing civilian casualties. Massive displacement of populations is not just the consequence of this increase in internal wars; it is indeed more often the intended goal.

During the 1990s, displacement also changed in scale, scope and complexity. In 1980, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was an organization responsible for 8 million people; in 1990, it had grown to 50 million and, today, there are some 22 million persons of concern to UNHCR. Problems have also grown in scope. There is no region in the world which is today unaffected by displacement; there are just as many displaced persons in Europe as there are in other parts of the world.

As a result of internal wars, whole groups of populations comprising the defeated government, the defeated army, rebels, militia, women and children are forced to flee. One of the most prominent examples of that was the flight from Rwanda in 1994 into what was then Eastern Zaire (today Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo). Another example is the flight of mixed groups of people from East Timor into West Timor. This growing complexity of displacement, of internal displacement, internal wars, has led to two phenomena: (a) a privatization of violence, with the main actors now being militias and rebels; and (b) the creation of wartime economies. It is becoming increasingly difficult to draw the line between political action, social banditry and organized crime. However, this deadly triangle is being fed by an abundance of small arms and light

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weapons. In such an increasingly difficult and dangerous environment, the security of refugees, refugee-populated areas, and humanitarian staff has therefore moved to the very top of UNHCR's agenda.

Indeed, the flight of entire groups within or across borders has led to a growing militarization of refugee or refugee-like situations, with the increasing presence of armed elements and small arms in and around refugee camps. Obviously, such militarization of refugee populated areas poses major problems for humanitarian work. Neutrality is an important principle that guides humanitarian action. UNHCR must work in refugee camps—camps for the displaced—that maintain a civilian, humanitarian character. Militarized refugee camps are not neutral. Secondly, growing militarization also weakens the ability of host States to maintain law and order, and often provokes cross-border or internal armed attacks on refugee sites and sites for the displaced. Therefore, it poses a direct security threat to refugees, to the local population hosting the refugees, and to humanitarian staff who have to (and want to) be there to protect the victims of conflicts. Finally, militarization of camps also makes it very often impossible for refugees to freely decide on their own future. A recent example of this are the camps and surrounding sites in West Timor where, because of the prevailing security conditions, most of the refugees were not able to choose whether to stay or go back.

In response to this growing crisis of refugee camp militarization, UNHCR, in collaboration with the United Nations Secretary-General and the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), in 1998 developed a concept called the "ladder of options". This concept is designed to help the international community address in a more systematic and effective manner the increasing insecurity in and around the camps. It describes a sequence of responses to the escalating threats to the security of refugees and humanitarian staff and to the civilian and humanitarian character of refugee camps.

The lowest step of the ladder deals with security situations that should be the responsibility of the host authorities. A higher level concerns situations where the host authorities have the will, but may not have the capacity and ability to address insecurity in and around camps. In such situations, humanitarian organizations such as

UNHCR will build local capacities through training, equipment, vehicles, etc. Middle and higher options of the ladder deal with situations in which local authorities have neither the capacity nor the will to address security threats. These cases warrant extreme responses such as international action, deployment of regional forces, or deployment of international military forces under either Chapter VI or Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations.

UNHCR experience has shown that the earlier the threat of militarization of refugee camps is diagnosed and addressed, the greater the chances to contain it. The key to operating the “ladder of options” is to focus on preventive action. Therefore, UNHCR, in agreement with DPKO and with governments, has established a rapid deployment standby arrangement whereby a number of governments are putting experts in the area of law and order and public security at UNHCR’s disposal. From now on, there will be security experts on all emergency teams sent to the field. These experts, called “humanitarian security officers”, in collaboration with local authorities, will diagnose potential security risks and propose preventive actions to be taken by local authorities, and, if necessary, supportive measures to be taken by the international community. More specifically, the primary responsibilities of these humanitarian security officers are:

1. to assess the nature and sources of threats to the humanitarian civilian character of refugee camps and settlements;
2. to assess the capacity and intent of local law enforcement services to provide security; and
3. as required and appropriate, to identify ways of enhancing the capacity of such services.

UNHCR has also held discussions with DPKO in follow-ups to the Secretary-General’s report on the protection of civilians in armed conflicts, over threats to the humanitarian character of camps. It has also held discussions on follow-ups to Security Council resolution 1296, which invites the Secretary-General to bring to the Council’s attention situations where such threats may constitute a threat to international peace and security. DPKO has endorsed UNHCR’s standby arrangements. DPKO has also indicated that it is ready to give immediate attention to appeals by the High Commissioner when refugee-populated areas risk becoming (or have become) militarized.

Finally, the militarization of refugee camps is becoming a matter of growing concern to UNHCR, to humanitarian organizations, and to host States in Africa and other parts of the world. In addition to developing strategies to operationalize the “ladder of options” concept, UNHCR is involved in discussions on the implementation of the Brahimi Report with a view to strengthening both the human security of refugees and displaced persons and the safety and security of humanitarian staff.

## **SMALL ARMS PROLIFERATION: A HUMANITARIAN CONCERN**

**Martin Griffiths\***

Conflict prevention is a humanitarian concern, and possibly, a humanitarian objective. It is absolutely incumbent upon the humanitarian community to look beyond the response to conflict, and to look into the fundamentalist use of protection. There can be no greater protection of civilians than to stop the fighting. The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, in Geneva, operates along those lines.

If it is at least a humanitarian concern and possibly a humanitarian objective to reduce or prevent conflict, then the issue of arms transfers, and arms control and disarmament, becomes central to the humanitarian world. Yet, the relationship between the humanitarian community and the disarmament community is, at best, patchy.

Security is the overwhelming issue of the day for humanitarian action, not just because of the atrocious killings of humanitarian workers, but because of the cumulative effects of the militarization of the context of humanitarian action and, of course, of the proliferation of, and easy access to, arms. Security—of humanitarian workers but also of civilians—is unquestionably the priority policy of the humanitarian community today. In the United Nations, it is almost impossible to make choices about priorities, but there is no question about this one. How can security be improved? It can be improved in two broad ways.

First, security can be improved through the adherence of conflicting parties to well-established humanitarian principles of civilian protection. This can be done by disseminating international humanitarian law—the International Committee of the Red Cross, of course, has a very special role in this regard. It can also be done by bringing together parties to the conflict to agree on temporary ceasefires and humanitarian corridors, or to agree that there should be no attacks on workers, on clinics, or on civilians. The Centre for

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\* Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva.

Humanitarian Dialogue thinks that such humanitarian agreements between parties have great scope and enormous potential.

Second, of course, is the issue of the control of light weapons and small arms. The statistics about the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and their predominance in the conflicts that we all face today, are well known. In early 1998, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs identified small arms as one of the first priority areas for advocacy. International efforts to control the traffic of small arms and light weapons is indeed the number one human security issue today. It is more important by far than the other very important human security issues and it presents a threat to international peace and security. Therefore, what should be the contribution of humanitarian organizations?

First, the humanitarian community needs to learn about the disarmament community—the acronyms, the jargon, the methodology—and the great potential it has, for example, in terms of tracking the traffic of small arms. Humanitarian organizations need to work with disarmament experts to move beyond anecdotes on the humanitarian consequences of the traffic in small arms and light weapons. Both communities need to collaborate on methodologies to produce data. Tangible and compelling evidence can help policy makers in the control of the illicit use and transfer of small arms and light weapons.

Secondly, humanitarian organizations need to agree on a simple aim. They need to take some lessons, for example, from the phenomenally successful campaign on the banning of landmines. They need to focus on some achievable and communicable aims. The UNIDIR draft paper entitled “Removing Military Weapons from Civilian Hands” (by Christophe Carle and Patricia Lewis) sets out in words that everyone can understand some of the measures that the humanitarian community might think about.

Finally, humanitarian organizations together need to draw up, perhaps taking ideas from this paper and others, a package of measures and services for Member States to assist them in trying to stem the flow of small arms and light weapons. The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue works in Indonesia, in the province of Aceh on the island of Sumatra. For many years, this province has been racked by a conflict fuelled by the proliferation of light weapons.

Recently, the armed group and the government have agreed on a humanitarian pause, a kind of ceasefire. Unfortunately, there are no provisions for services or international assistance to the government to try to ease the control of light weapons in that province, to try to prevent those light weapons from entering the country and their being easily used. A strategy should be developed to help governments to address this issue.

The control of small arms and light weapons proliferation is the most serious issue facing not only humanitarian action, but also global security. The international community should try to move this issue from the impossible to the merely difficult. And if everyone recognizes that it is only difficult to achieve progress, then all may be made more confident to address it and put it on the agenda as the number one priority. Perhaps the 2001 Small Arms Conference is the best place to start.

## **NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT IS HUMANITARIAN ACTION**

**Randall Forsberg\***

It is very clear that part of the agenda of humanitarian action should be the prevention of the deaths and maiming and injuries caused by small arms and light weapons. By the same token, the prevention of the use of chemical or biological weapons should be seen as a humanitarian task. Indeed, these awful weapons can inflict the most cruel and inhumane forms of dying on innocent civilian populations. It is somewhat harder to make a case that the elimination of the other major instruments of death and destruction, nuclear weapons and major conventional armaments, somehow represents a form of humanitarian action. It might seem to broaden out the humanitarian agenda too far. However, there are important connections among the issues.

Nuclear weapons are not weapons in any ordinary sense. In fact, as weapons of mass destruction, they are not in the same class as chemical and biological weapons. Nuclear weapons can obliterate whole cities. They are weapons of mass annihilation. In the 1980s, their danger was brought home by the passionate eloquence of Jonathan Schell and Helen Caldicott, Joseph Rotblat, Andrei Sakharov, Edward Thompson, Mordechai Vanunu, and hundreds of thousands of concerned individuals around the world. They reminded everyone that the very idea of humanitarian action crumbles at the image of the horror that would be unleashed by just one nuclear bomb exploded on one city anywhere in the world.

Humanitarian action must include prevention. The international community must take the steps needed to ensure that there will never be another Hiroshima or Nagasaki. The world simply cannot wait to bring in the vastly inadequate ambulances and blankets, the field hospitals and food and tents after the fact. War differs from natural catastrophes, because it is a man-made catastrophe. It differs because it is the one major catastrophe that can in fact be prevented with careful work long before the event. Those who work

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to prevent armed conflict and abolish stocks of deadly armaments, desperately need the support of those who work for humanitarian relief and human rights, for the environment and for development, to join our cause, if for no other reason, than to advance world peace. Political leaders say that nuclear weapons cannot be abolished in the near future, because doing so would raise the risk of other forms of war. China, for example, fears that if it abandons nuclear weapons, it will face a greater threat of US military intervention in Taiwan. Russia fears that if it gives up nuclear arms, it may see conventional incursions from the East, West or South over its already shrunken borders. India and Pakistan back up the conventional forces long embroiled in their confrontation over Kashmir with a new threat of escalation to nuclear war. And Israel holds out nuclear annihilation as its weapon of last resort.

In every one of these cases, there is a very tight connection between the risks of major conventional war that would threaten national sovereignty or territorial integrity and the ongoing threat of nuclear annihilation. In fact, this is the moral case that has been made by political leaders: that nuclear weapons not only, or not mainly, pose a threat of nuclear war and deter threats of nuclear attacks, but also deter other very important threats. So they say this is not merely a one-sided humanitarian issue. If they proceed immediately to abolish nuclear weapons, then other terrible catastrophes of major non-nuclear war may befall them. Peace and disarmament activists have long argued that these dangers are incommensurate, that nothing is worth the price of nuclear annihilation and that governments do not have the right to inflict this risk on us. Everyone should do all that they can to reduce those other risks that have for so long justified the existence of nuclear weapons in public argument. The risks of major conventional war have fallen off the map of our concern and of peace and disarmament efforts since the end of the Cold War in 1990. However, the burdens of maintaining armed forces to deter and fight such wars are also important in themselves. This is another area where humanitarian, human rights, development and environmental activists should put at least as much weight on prevention before the fact, as on relief and rebuilding after the fact. There are five main reasons to be concerned about major conventional weapons and risks of major conventional war.



The first mainly has to do with military spending. The world is now spending over US\$ 700 billion a year on military forces. More than 95 per cent of this goes to major conventional armaments. So everyone may have forgotten about them and stopped talking about them, but governments are using the surplus product of our societies, the resources that should be available for meeting basic human needs, for education and health, for making the world a better place. Those resources are being wasted on these weapons.

Secondly, although the focus has been primarily on internal wars, there are still major regional conventional arms races, in the Middle East, in South Asia and in East Asia. These arms impede democratic and economic development and they lead directly to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. There is no part of the world in which there has been nuclear proliferation, or there is a risk of nuclear proliferation, which has not first had a major conventional arms race, and that is as true today as it was in each of the previous decades.

Thirdly, even more urgently, a new conventional and nuclear arms race in Asia is very likely. There could be a stand-off between the two Koreas, or perhaps the one Korea, Japan and China, with the United States weighing in as a kind of sea anchor. The prospective deployment of missile defence could also lead to a nuclear arms race, with military spending on the rise, with independent arms industries and arms manufacturing on the rise. Something very much like the Cold War in Europe could take place over the next 50 years in Asia, and that will happen unless the needs of conventional disarmament are addressed.

Fourthly, conventional disarmament lies at the heart of shifting the burden of responsibility for keeping the peace from individual nation states to the United Nations and to a functioning international security system. In a genuine international peace system, powerful nation states cannot independently decide to use their military forces to bring about the outcomes, or try to bring about the outcomes that they think are best.

The fifth and last of this list of reasons is, of course, simply to prevent conventional war, which kills thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people. Even in one-sided wars where no one is killed on one side, there are thousands or tens of thousands

of victims on the other side. Over the course of the twentieth century, through two world wars, the Cold War, and the nuclear arms race, nation states have developed a vast repertoire of means of dealing with conflicts in non-violent ways and assuring that they continue to be dealt with in non-violent ways. Governments have the means to reduce the economic, social and political burdens of vast preparations for conventional war, and to reduce the likelihood and potential scale of outbreaks of conventional war. This, in fact, is the agenda of the Global Action to Prevent War.

Indeed, the Global Action to Prevent War tries to bring people together to look at, as part of a single whole, four components of efforts to prevent war and to reduce the burden of arming. These are:

1. *Conventional disarmament, along with disarmament of nuclear weapons, and the control and tremendous reduction of small arms and light weapons.* In the area of major conventional weapons, the goal should be to cut back military forces to the minimum needed in individual nation states to protect national sovereignty and territorial integrity;
2. *Shifting burden from nation states to the international community.* The responsibility for defence against aggression and for intervention to prevent and end genocide and crimes against humanity should be shifted from individual nation states to the international community, i.e. the UN or regional security organizations; and
3. *Strengthening international and regional mechanisms in conflict prevention and conflict resolution.* Regional organizations—such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe—and international organizations—such as the International Criminal Court—should strengthen or develop their conflict prevention capacities. For example, the UN's Conflict Prevention Centre could be expanded to provide much better early warning about unarmed conflicts escalating to armed conflict;
4. *Culture of peace.* A culture of tolerance and a commitment to non-violent means of resolving conflicts, ending oppression and

injustice and achieving basic human rights should be developed.

These four components—disarmament, increased reliance on international institutions, better international institutions, and a culture of peace—can, when taken together and pursued in a proactive way, reduce the frequency of outbreaks of major international conflict and of major internal armed conflict. They can also foster a more peaceful global society, which is less militarized, less armed, less confrontational. In sum, the international community can, and should, try to achieve humanitarian objectives not just after catastrophes have happened, but also beforehand: disarmament is humanitarian action.