DISARMAMENT COMMISSION
1989 substantive session
New York, 8-31 May 1989
Agenda item 9

SUBSTANTIVE CONSIDERATION OF ISSUES RELATED TO
CONVENTIONAL DISARMAMENT

International arms transfers

Working paper submitted by Costa Rica

1. By a vote of 110 in favour, none against and 38 abstentions, the General
Assembly in 1988 adopted resolution 43/75 I on "International arms transfers". In
paragraph 3 of that resolution, the Disarmament Commission was requested to take
the following matters into account in its deliberations during its 1989 substantive
session:

A. "The conviction that arms transfers in all their aspects deserve
serious consideration by the international community, inter alia, because of
(a) their potential effects in areas where tension and regional conflict
threaten international peace and security and national security; (b) their
known and potential negative effects on the process of the peaceful social and
economic development of all peoples; and (c) increasing illicit and covert
arms trafficking".

B. The need for Member States to consider, inter alia, the following
measures relating to these concerns: "(a) Reinforcement of their national
systems of control and vigilance concerning production and transport of arms;
(b) Examination of ways and means of refraining from acquiring arms additional
to those needed for legitimate national security requirements, taking into
account the specific characteristics of each region; and (g) Examination of
the ways and means of providing for more openness and transparency with regard
to world-wide arms transfers".

2. An objective analysis of the most recent military conflicts which have
occurred in the world leaves no room for doubt regarding the real effects which
international arms transfers have in areas suffering from tension and conflict. An objective and systematic study of the problems of development and their relationship to the arms race also leaves no question as to the negative effects of the international arms trade on the process of economic and social change, particularly in the underdeveloped areas of the world. The data provided by various reliable sources in recent months regarding illicit trafficking in weapons systems, arms and technology for the manufacture of arms demonstrate the consequences which can result from the covert arms trade.

3. No study of the problem of international arms trafficking is needed for the international community to take action. The resolution introduced in 1988 by Colombia and Costa Rica in which the Secretary-General was requested to carry out, with the assistance of governmental experts, a study on ways and means of promoting transparency in international transfers of conventional arms was aimed precisely at further clarifying a problem which merits systematic attention on the part of the international community and Member States. In any event, the problem of international arms transfers requires a scientific evaluation of an interdisciplinary nature with a view to identifying the scope of such transfers and their effects on economic and social development and on international security. The same could be said of other areas relating to the arms race in the world on which the General Assembly frequently requests studies and the updating of studies already carried out.

4. The document containing the recommendations which the Disarmament Commission may submit to the General Assembly for consideration should include a complete section devoted to the problem of arms transfers. We believe that this part of the document should, for the time being, come under the heading of conventional disarmament. We know that international arms transfers relate increasingly to weapons which are not conventional or, at least, to weapons which we cannot with certainty categorize as such, given the technology involved. However, this is not a question which we should leave for the next session of the General Assembly. There are ample grounds for saying that the question of international arms transfers should be dealt with in a serious, discreet, and responsible manner. I believe, however, that we must record our disagreement with two ideas expressed in paragraphs 2 and 7 of working paper A/CN.10/118 which seem to us mistaken. International arms transfers can be justified almost only in cases of self-defence. The struggle against colonialism, the so-called neo-colonialism or imperialism is of a different nature. It is difficult for small nations to confront these new economic Powers with arms.

5. If we really wish to be serious in dealing with this problem, we must expand the scope to include not only the two super-Powers, but also a very broad group of nations which negotiate together with them in matters relating to the arms race. In such transactions, the responsibility is shared by the major producers and suppliers and by the purchasers, some of whom have already become producers and intermediaries in the arms trade.

6. We are very clear on this point: international arms transfers are a responsibility shared by all the nations of the world, large and small, rich and poor, militarized and non-militarized. We would be approaching this problem in the
wrong way if we were to lay the blame only on the two super-Powers. It is clear that the substantial participation by many other nations, including some third world nations, in the arms trade is increasing daily.

7. Accordingly, the Disarmament Commission must include in its recommendations to the General Assembly a number of ideas which take account of the following elements:

A. A reaffirmation that the problem of international arms transfers, both overt and covert, merit increasing attention on the part of the organized international community and that all States Members have a responsibility in the matter.

B. The recognition that such trade exchanges are a central element in the arms race.

C. The recognition that such trade exchanges help to exacerbate tension in areas of conflict and contribute to world, regional and national security.

D. The recognition that arms transfers include conventional arms and non-conventional (including nuclear) arms.

E. The recognition that a reduction in international arms transfers is an essential element in the adoption of confidence-building measures.

F. The need to initiate work on the establishment of an international register of arms and arms transfers within the United Nations Secretariat.