On 20 February 2007, under the Presidency of the Slovak Republic, the United Nations Security Council held its first ever open debate on the topic of security sector reform (SSR). At the conclusion of the debate, the Council adopted a presidential statement stressing that security sector reform was critical to the consolidation of peace and stability, promoting poverty reduction, rule of law, human rights and good governance and preventing countries from relapsing into conflict. The Council recognized the significant contributions made by the United Nations system to SSR and the increasing engagement of United Nations organs, funds, programmes and agencies in the field. In this context, the Council emphasized the need for a comprehensive report of the Secretary General on United Nations approaches to SSR that should identify lessons learned and make concrete recommendations on the identification, prioritisation and sequencing of United Nations support in this area as well as on ways to improve the effectiveness and coordination of all United Nations system entities

1 S/PRST/2007/3
that support SSR. The Secretary-General’s report is set to have profound implications for the work of the United Nations at headquarters and, most importantly in the field.

The Council further recognized the need for United Nations peace operations mandates to take into account, as appropriate, national security sector reform priorities, and requested the Peacebuilding Commission to include consideration of SSR programmes in designing integrated peacebuilding strategies. In this regard, the establishment by the United Nations Secretariat of an Inter-Agency Working Group on SSR and the creation within the Department of Peacekeeping Operations of an Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions provide new opportunities and mechanisms to develop a coherent and coordinated policy framework for United Nations support to nationally driven SSR processes. At its 2007 substantive session, the General Assembly’s Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations acknowledged the efforts of the Inter-Agency Working Group and recognized the need for a holistic and coherent approach to SSR within the United Nations system, requesting in its turn that the Secretary-General submit a comprehensive report on the subject.

In its statement, the Security Council welcomed the joint initiative of Slovakia and South Africa to organise a workshop focusing on experiences and challenges of SSR in Africa. This workshop was held in Cape Town on 7 and 8 November 2007, with representatives of 47 countries, including 25 African countries, the African Union, the Economic Community Of West African States and the Southern African Development Community, and the United Nations system as well as several non-governmental organisations, in attendance. Support expressed for the meeting and its outcome highlighted the importance attached by all to the development of common United Nations approaches to SSR.

Thus, the Security Council open debate held in February 2007 has clearly set in motion important processes. Given the presence in Geneva of a multitude of actors with strong capacity and in-depth expertise in SSR, this seminar provides a timely opportunity to:

- assess the progress achieved and political, institutional and operational challenges faced in the year since the open debate;
- provide an early platform for the discussion of the Secretary-General's report on SSR;
- review analytical work that can contribute to the further elaboration and operationalisation of common, comprehensive and coherent UN approaches to SSR;
- reflect on the political process that has shaped these approaches;
- nurture a greater engagement between United Nations Headquarters and key stakeholders located away from Headquarters, with a view to ensuring that their practical experience and expertise feed into current deliberations.