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First Committee

Thematic Discussion on Conventional Weapons

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Check against delivery
1. Unlike with nuclear weapons, where the international community is struggling to find a way to towards meaningful disarmament negotiations, the area of conventional weapons has seen some significant multilateral progress in recent years. We have made important headways in introducing and anchoring humanitarian considerations into the disarmament context by banning and stigmatizing some of the most insidious weapons, such as antipersonnel mines and cluster munitions. We have also made significant progress in addressing the long-term impact of past use and we have introduced into the discussion a stronger focus on victims and assistance to victims. A lot has also been achieved in addressing the complex issue of small arms and light weapons (SALW). The next months will again see a very dense calendar of major events in the field of conventional weapons in different multilateral fora starting with the upcoming CCW Review Conference and the Mine-Ban-Convention Meeting of States Parties in Cambodia, followed in 2012 by the Diplomatic Conference on an Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and the Review Conference of the UN Programme of Action on SALW. Furthermore, important work will continue in the intersessional framework of the Convention on Cluster Munitions and the Mine-Ban-Treaty. Austria has been and will continue to be very active and committed to all these processes.

2. Austria firmly supports the negotiation of an Arms Trade Treaty, a legally binding international instrument establishing the highest common international standards for the transfers of conventional weapons aimed at preventing the illegal trade and at regulating legal arms trade. We welcome the work that has been done so far in the preparatory process and the overall constructive approach that has been taken by all participating states. Let me express in this context our appreciation of the chairmanship of Ambassador García Moritán of Argentina and say that we would fully support Ambassador Moritán also as president for the Diplomatic Conference. We hope for the outcome of the negotiations to be a universal ATT that would cover a wide scope with respect to the types of arms and the activities covered. Arms exports should be measured against the highest standards, such as respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, as well as the risk of diversion. Furthermore, we consider a high degree of transparency to be an important element of a future ATT. To contribute to wide participation in the ATT negotiating process, Austria hosted a regional seminar organized with UNIDIR on the ATT in February 2010 and concurrently a NGO Conference on the subject.

3. SALW cause death of and injure hundreds of thousands of people, mostly civilians, every year. Illicit trade and excessive accumulation adversely affect regional and international security and stability, fuel conflicts and armed violence and threaten the lives of individuals. Austria as a arms producing and exporting country feels a special responsibility and is committed to working with all UN Member States in addressing these challenges, within the framework of the 2001 UN Programme of Action. Austria has supported a number of projects in the SALW field in Africa, the continent worst affected: (support for Central African Convention for the Control of SALW, their Ammunition and All Parts and Components that can be used for their Manufacture, Repair and Assembly, software tool for Eastern African Authorities on stocks and transfers on SALW. The Austrian Army supports SALW stockpile management projects in Africa and the Balkans.) We look forward to the 2012 Review Conference on the UN Programme of Action which will assess the level of implementation of the PoA and strive to further improve it. We will work constructively to make progress at the Review Conference, in particular in the areas of marking and tracing of SALW.
4. Austria welcomes the continuous progress in the universalisation and implementation of the Mine-Ban-Convention and is committed to implementing the Cartagena Action Plan. Despite significant progress, much remains to be done. Universality remains one of highest priorities and we would like to appeal to all States outside the Convention to accede as soon as possible. Important challenges remain in the areas of clearance and particularly also in the area of victim assistance. Nevertheless, the Mine-Ban-Convention is, in our view, one of the key accomplishments of recent years both, as a real disarmament instrument as well as an important development of international humanitarian law (IHL). The effectiveness of the norm against antipersonnel mines goes much beyond the membership of the Convention.

5. While the Mine-Ban-Convention came about as a result of the huge scale of landmines use and contamination, the Convention on Cluster Munitions to a large extent offers the chance of prevention. There have been some unacceptable cases of use of cluster munitions, such as for example in Southern Lebanon in 2006. However, the scale of the cluster munitions problem is not the same as it was for antipersonnel mines in the 1990s. We must preserve this major accomplishment of IHL and focus on the full implementation of the Convention. In this context, Austria welcomes the growing number of ratifications of and accessions to the Convention and the declaration adopted at the Meeting of States Parties in Beirut last September. Let me use this opportunity to congratulate Lebanon again for the excellent organization of this meeting.

6. The 4th CCW Review Conference in Geneva, November 2011 will review, clarify and strengthen all existing CCW obligations and their implementation. However, most attention will be given to the negotiations on a CCW protocol on cluster munitions. Austria’s position on this process is well known. We will assess any potential outcome against its complementarity to and compatibility with the Convention on Cluster Munitions. We consider the approach that has been followed so far to be flawed. The restrictions proposed in the Chair’s text mean in fact a legitimization of all cluster munitions not covered by the proposal, all of which are known to cause terrible humanitarian problems. In addition, we have serious reservations as to the adverse precedent created for IHL by establishing an alternative and weaker international norm on cluster munitions. We have therefore suggested with other states a viable alternative approach as a potential result of the negotiation process. Currently, there is no consensus on any of the proposals which is a requirement for reaching an outcome in the CCW context. We will remain engaged to work on an meaningful outcome that meets the abovementioned criteria.

7. In closing, I would like to reiterate that Austria’s approach on conventional weapons is driven by our overall policy priority on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. This was one of our key priorities during our recent membership in the Security Council and we were very pleased that the adoption of the landmark Security Council Resolution 1894 (2009) on the protection of civilians in armed conflict was achieved during this time. Austria will continue to work in the future on conventional weapons following an approach that looks at the effects of the use of weapons on innocent civilians. We will work to consolidate established norms on conventional weapons and are interested in serious discussions on threats to civilians posed by other weapons, such as the dangers of anti-vehicle mines or, more broadly, on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

Thank you