Statement
by
Ambassador Alexander Kmentt
Director for Disarmament, Arms Control and Non-Proliferation,
Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs

at the Thematic Debate on Conventional Weapons
of the First Committee

New York, 1 November 2012
Mr. Chairman,

Austria aligns itself with the statement by the European Union on conventional weapons delivered earlier. Allow me to contribute some Austrian perspectives to this debate, particularly addressing the protection of civilians in light of current and future challenges.

International humanitarian law, with the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols at its core, and disarmament treaty law provide the humanitarian normative framework for the protection of civilians. It is the responsibility of all parties of conflict to strictly comply with applicable international humanitarian law, human rights and refugee law and to ensure that the civilian population is respected and protected. In this context, we reiterate the grave concern expressed by FM Spindelegger about recent reports on the use of cluster munitions in Syria and recall that the obligation to protect civilians from unnecessary harm applies to all states.

Existing humanitarian disarmament instruments such as the Mine Ban Convention and the Cluster Munition Convention have played a crucial role in strengthening the normative realm of the international humanitarian legal framework for the protection of civilians. We are pleased to recognize the preventive impact of these instruments. They have further set the norm for the recognition of the rights of victims on a non-discriminatory basis and incorporated provisions for victim assistance. We emphasize here that the responsibility of states to protect and safeguard their people also includes the assistance to civilians who fall victims of the use of weapons.

Reports about the human suffering of civilians resulting from armed violence should remind us of our ongoing responsibility to assess the international humanitarian law framework. We should constantly examine whether it is adequate for the objective to systematically reduce the civilian suffering from the use of weapons in armed conflict. New weapon technologies and weapons systems need to be assessed for their potential humanitarian impact and IHL implications.

In this light, Austria shares the concern expressed by the Secretary General about the humanitarian effects of explosive weapons. The heightened risk of indiscriminate harm and the appalling suffering explosive weapons cause when used in densely populated areas should be reason enough for us to consider this issue in depth, including the possibility of developing stronger international standards.

Mr. Chairman,

We are much aware that the humanitarian impact of armed violence is by no means limited to armed conflict. The majority of civilian casualties and deaths resulting from armed violence occur in countries that are not affected by armed conflict. Such armed violence causes victims whose needs and rights have to be addressed. Moreover, armed violence cannot be separated from transnational crime, including trafficking of persons, drugs and arms.

In this context, we would like to highlight the crucial role that a future strong and effective Arms Trade Treaty would play in reducing civil casualties and arms trade. We are confident that negotiations on a Treaty with the highest possible international standards for the transfer of conventional weapons can be completed within a short period of time.
The prevention and reduction of human suffering resulting from armed violence, including in armed conflict, must continue to be a priority for the UN membership. These issues need to be addressed comprehensively, involving disarmament, human rights, humanitarian, development communities and with the partnership among states and relevant international and civil society actors.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman.