THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND

STATEMENT ON CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS

By

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UK Head of Delegation
to the
68th UNGA First Committee

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Mr Chairman,

2013 has been a momentous year for those of us that work to counter the irresponsible and illicit spread of conventional arms. After seven years of hard work, we have agreed an Arms Trade Treaty. For the first time in a generation, we have showed what can be achieved when there is a strong vision and a clear sense of purpose that binds together nations from every corner of the world.

In April, I was proud to be part of the United Kingdom delegation that came here to finish our work on the Arms Trade Treaty. I was proud to work alongside our fellow co-authors, who saw the need for the Treaty back in 2006 and refused to rest until it was agreed. I was proud to be part of a decade-long civil society campaign that brought to the attention of the United Nations, the suffering caused by armed violence. And I was proud to be amongst the one hundred and fifty-four nations that voted to change the world for the better on 2 April.

However, our task is far from over. We said in April that the biggest challenge still lies ahead. We now have a treaty that has the power to save lives, support development and protect the legitimate defence industry. But it will not achieve its aims unless it is globally and effectively implemented.

That is why the United Kingdom has pledged more than £350,000 to support States that wish to implement the Arms Trade Treaty. And that is why we are working to ratify as soon as possible.

114 states have already signed the Treaty. That is a tremendous achievement. I sincerely hope that in the next year, even more states will sign and ratify so that our Treaty will enter into force and start to fulfil its promise.

Earlier this week the UK supported a side event on Gender Based Violence and the Arms Trade Treaty. By requiring States Parties to assess, prior to the authorization of arms exports, the risk of those arms being used to commit serious acts of gender-based violence, the Arms Trade Treaty is making important steps to make the world a safer place. But more needs to be done.

Sexual violence in conflict is widespread. Most frequently it is carried out by one group against another with the deliberate intention of destroying, degrading, humiliating and scaring political opponents or entire ethnic and religious groups. It affects not only large numbers of women, but also men and children. In addition to the physical and psychological trauma suffered by survivors, sexual violence leads to increased ethnic, sectarian and other divisions, further entrenching conflict and instability.

This is why during the 68th UNGA Ministerial Week in September our Foreign Secretary launched the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, which has now been endorsed by 136 countries.

Mr Chairman,

The Arms Trade Treaty is a great achievement for the United Nations. But it is not the only achievement of the past year. A few weeks ago, the UN Security Council agreed resolution 2117 on small arms and light weapons. This important resolution reminds us all of the need to act on the illicit and poorly regulated arms that destabilise regions, fuel conflict and ruin futures.

We were disappointed that this year’s GGE on the UN Conventional Arms Register could not reach consensus on the proposal to include small arms as a mandatory category. But this was not our only opportunity to act. Next year’s biennial meeting of States Parties to the UN Programme of Action will be an important opportunity to take stock and redouble our efforts.
Mr Chairman,

We don't have to look far to see the harm caused by illicit or poorly regulated conventional arms. Every region of the world bears the scars of conflict. The United Kingdom remains committed to helping countries blighted by the legacy of conflict. On 22 October the UK hosted a meeting of the London 11—the core group of Friends on Syria. The Foreign Ministers called on the Syrian regime to end the siege of urban areas and the indiscriminate attacks against civilians, in particular through air bombardment and the use of ballistic missiles, cluster bombs and explosive barrels.

We welcome the successful conclusion of the fourth meeting of States Parties to the Oslo Convention on Cluster Munitions in Lusaka last month. The UK is on track to destroy the last of our stocks of cluster munitions before the end of this year, five years ahead of our target date. We hope that next year’s review of the Ottawa Convention on anti-personnel landmines can build on this momentum and bring more states into the international efforts to end the harm these weapons can cause.

For over 20 years, the UK has supported some of the poorest countries around the world to clear landmines and explosive remnants of war after conflict. In the last three years alone, through the UK’s £30m global mine action programme, UK support has:

- Removed over 70,000 landmines and explosive remnants of war;
- Released over 10,000 hectares of contaminated or suspected hazardous land so that people can return to their everyday lives; and
- Increased the awareness of hundreds of thousands of people through mine risk education.

This year, we commissioned an independent, and comprehensive, evaluation of the UK’s mine action programme (which expires in March 2014). The evaluation found that the programme has been incredibly successful, enabling safe access to means of production, development and use of public services, shelter and settlements, better use of natural resources and infrastructure. Mine clearance around major economic infrastructure, such as power lines and transport in Mozambique for example, has brought significant strategic benefits to the national economy.

Over the last few months, the UK has been working with NGOs, UN agencies and mine-affected governments to develop a new UK mine action approach paper entitled: ‘Clearing a path to development: The UK Government’s approach to landmines and explosive remnants of war in developing countries’. This paper sets out the UK Government’s priorities and principles in tackling the threat of landmines and explosive remnants of war in developing countries and sets out a number of guiding principles for future UK funding.

Over the past few weeks we have scoped out continued UK mine action programmes in Mozambique, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Laos and Cambodia. We are currently drafting up the scope and scale of each of these programmes which we will issue in due course. We also intend to scope out new UK mine action programmes, over the next 12 months, in Sudan, South Sudan, Burma, Somalia, Yemen and Zimbabwe as conditions on the ground allow.

Our commitment to mine action is an important part of the UK’s contribution to overseas development assistance. But, as I said earlier, conventional arms in the wrong hands do not only threaten development, they also pose a threat to international peace, security and stability.

Mr Chairman,

The people of Libya live with this threat every day due to the continued presence in Libya of unsecured arms and ammunition left by four decades of excessive, uncontrolled stockpiling by the Qadafi regime.
Recognising that the Libyan government made arms and ammunition control a priority at the Paris Ministerial Conference in February this year, the UK urges the international community to work with Libya and the UN to produce a lasting solution to this issue. The UK is ready to provide expertise, funds and support to this process. It is only by working together across regions that this challenge can be effectively addressed.

Mr Chairman,

First Committee is also an opportunity to look ahead. I am looking forward to returning to Geneva for the meeting of States Parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and our discussions on lethal autonomous robotics. This is an important issue, and one that sits well within the expert remit of the CCW. I hope that we can bring the UK's expertise and experience to bear.

Mr Chairman,

2013 has been a momentous year. We all deserve to take a moment to congratulate the world's governments, industry and civil society for what we have achieved together. And it's right that we do that within the United Nations, where we unite our strength to maintain international peace and security. But we must not rest here; the adoption of the Arms Trade Treaty is the first step. Now our real work starts, ensuring its prompt entry into force and effective implementation.