STATEMENT BY SOUTH AFRICA ON CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS DURING THE THEMATIC DEBATE OF THE 2013 UN FIRST COMMITTEE

30 October 2013

Thank you, Chairperson,

In view of time constraints, I will limit my remarks during this thematic discussion on conventional weapons to only three issues, namely the Arms Trade Treaty, the Convention on Cluster Munitions and the UNPoA on Small Arms and Light Weapons.

As we are all aware, the most significant development that took place during this year in the field of conventional arms was the landmark adoption of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) on 2 April 2013. South Africa welcomed its adoption following the tireless efforts of Ambassador Roberto Moritan of Argentina during the 2012 process and also the foresight and vigorous determination with which Ambassador Peter Woolcott of Australia steered the 2013 negotiations to its conclusion. We all know the immense challenges that he faced, together with the broader UN membership, in achieving a consensus agreement. At the time of the vote, when South Africa voted in favour of the ATT’s adoption, our delegation stated that this is an “international instrument that fills a glaring gap that existed in the global conventional arms control system.” Most of all, we believe that the central aspect of the effective implementation of the ATT lies in the requirement that prospective States Parties should establish, where they do not already exist, effective national conventional arms transfer control legislation, dedicated and functioning arms control systems, as well as official national administrative guidelines, national inspectorates and practical enforcement measures, including punitive measures for transgressions.

The fact that South Africa was eager for President Zuma to sign the ATT during UNGA68 reflects the importance my country attributes to this highly relevant Treaty.

Chairperson,

South Africa has on many occasions expressed its concern about the humanitarian impact of cluster munitions. As a Signatory to the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM), South Africa is fully committed to the implementation of all its provisions. South Africa’s decision to sign the Convention was driven by the conviction that these weapons have not only become obsolete as weapons of modern warfare, but that their recent use in conflicts have shown them to cause unacceptable harm to civilians, even long after the cessation of active hostilities.

With regard to ratification, we are pleased to announce that the CCM has been sent to Parliament for ratification. South Africa’s Cabinet also supported the destruction of cluster munitions stocks in compliance with the Convention. The Cabinet further emphasised that the ratification of the Convention is in line with South Africa’s commitments to upholding
human rights and humanitarian law when engaging in warfare. We hope that, now that this crucial step has been completed, the ratification by Parliament will be finalised as soon as possible.

We believe that we should redouble our efforts to convince and bring into the fold those that have not yet acceded to the Convention, in particular the users and producers of cluster munitions. It is a sad reality that suffering on the African Continent has often been caused by weapons that are manufactured elsewhere in the world. Moreover, we need to continue to stigmatise the use of cluster munitions as weapons of war. We call upon all States to condemn any use of cluster munitions as this has negative effects on the livelihoods of the people particularly those who live in affected areas, even long after the cessation of conflict.

Chairperson,

South Africa continues to believe that the UN Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons (UNPoA) represents the central universally agreed set of undertakings to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons and that its full implementation remains as relevant today as it was when it was adopted in 2001.

The success of last year’s Second Review Conference on the implementation of the UNPoA bears testimony to this. We believe that the results-oriented outcomes of that RevCon will resonate through to the Fifth Biennial Meeting of States (BMS5) on the implementation of the UNPoA and we are pleased that the distinguished Permanent Representative of Afghanistan will chair BMS5 and assure him of South Africa’s full support.

As far as the full and effective implementation of the UNPoA is concerned, a number of implementation challenges still remain. In many States some of the very basic elements of national stockpile management-related measures still need to be implemented. Such a lack of adequate national controls poses a critical risk as a potential source of diversion into the illicit trade. The aspects of what such national stockpile management measures encompass are vast and cover issues from marking and record-keeping, secure storage and arms control transfer structures and systems. We should continue to guard against assuming that these basic elements have already been implemented by the vast majority of States.

Chairperson,

Apart from national UNPoA implementation efforts, my delegation wishes to emphasise the full implementation of the entire UNPoA; including that of its undertakings related to the issue of international cooperation and assistance. Most developing States are not in a position to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons on their own. Without the international assistance required by these States, many of the issues that are increasingly being raised by States, such as the undermining of international humanitarian and human rights law, transnational organised crime and other forms of
violent crime, humanitarian assistance to victims of armed conflict, the displacement of civilians and the threats posed to sustainable development and poverty eradication will never be adequately addressed. The task relating to the successful and full implementation of the UNPoA at all levels rests on all our shoulders, namely Member States, international and regional organisations, in partnership with civil society. It is a task that none of us are able to do alone.

In closing, Chairperson, it is common cause that, from an environmental perspective, certain substances used in conventional weapons can be hazardous to human health. In this regard, my delegation is of the view that we should support efforts aimed at increasing our knowledge of the potential humanitarian impact of such substances in order to better understand the civilian health and environmental legacy of conflict. In the same vein, my delegation would also support further discussions on the emerging issue of lethal autonomous weapon systems.

I thank you, Chairperson.