Final Conference on the Arms Trade Treaty, 18-28 March 2013

Opening statement by

Denmark, Germany, Mexico, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom

Finalising the Arms Trade Treaty: Time for Brave Diplomacy

In a world that protects its citizen’s welfare by regulating the trade in cars, medicine and fruit and vegetables it is inexcusable that no international instrument exists for the regulation of the international trade in arms. The negotiations starting today at the UN in New York offer a historic opportunity to put this right. The international community faces an important choice: a choice between saving lives and reducing conflict, or shying away from our common responsibility. The time has come for the international community to do the right thing and conclude a strong Arms Trade Treaty.

Every year the unregulated, illicit flow of arms claims hundreds of thousands of lives across the globe. The vast majority of these victims are innocent civilians. Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier of the Sierra Leone Army, published a Cri du Coeur in the New York Times last year. He wrote: “Sierra Leone had no capacity to manufacture the arms and ammunition used in the conflict”. Still Beah - at the time only thirteen years old - was given a gun and ammunition, somehow acquired on the international arms market. Violence, terrorism and crime fuelled by unregulated or illegal weapons undermine security, sustainable development, human rights and stability.

An Arms Trade Treaty will help stop arms ending up in the hands of child soldiers like Beah. The treaty will seek to counter the illicit trade in arms, by requiring each country to put in place a robust set of national transfer controls. These would require arms exports to be assessed on the basis of a range of criteria including respect for international humanitarian law and human rights. The treaty will help prevent the diversion of conventional arms towards the illicit market. It would introduce greater transparency into the arms trade helping to build global confidence while giving the unscrupulous nowhere to hide.

For some States, setting up and enhancing a national transfer control system might present a challenge. Governments will need to cooperate with and assist each other while implementing the Arms Trade Treaty, so that it can be universally applied and effective.

The intention of the Arms Trade Treaty is not to obstruct the legitimate trade in arms. Instead it will protect it by bringing rigor and greater accountability while fully recognizing every State’s rights to legitimate self-defence. Neither does the Arms Trade Treaty set rules for domestic arms regulation nor laws on the possession of arms; this is categorically a matter for national authorities to determine.

We are confident that an ambitious outcome acceptable to all responsible members of the international community is within reach. After six years of negotiation most governments now agree on the main elements of such a treaty. Differences remain, but momentum is building and our governments will spare no effort to ensure that these negotiations have the best possible chance of success. This is an historic opportunity to agree a Treaty that will save lives and make the world a safer place, history will not forgive those who seek to prevent it. Now is the time for brave diplomacy.

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