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United Nations Disarmament Commission

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General Debate

Statement by H.E. Mr Robert Hill Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations

(Check against delivery)

Mr Chair

There can be no doubt that the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is among the gravest threats confronting the international community.

The international security environment has changed markedly since the end of the Cold War. Globalisation has increased the opportunities for states to acquire or develop WMD. Moreover, with the rise of trans-national terrorism, we confront the possibility of terrorists fulfilling their desire to obtain and use WMD. In this complex global environment, government strategies must be multidimensional, making full use of the range of tools developed to curb the spread of WMD.

Australia is a strong supporter of multilateral approaches to non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament. The major treaties, including the NPT, and measures such as UNSCR 1540 are central to maintaining shared international standards in this area. We also strongly support practical measures that reinforce the multilateral treaties, such as the export control regimes.

Australia readily embraced the Proliferation Security Initiative as an important means to strengthen international cooperation on combating WMD proliferation, and we are pleased that support for this initiative continues to grow. We encourage those states that

have not expressed support for PSI to look again at the practical ways it can contribute to the security of us all.

In July 2006, Australia accepted an invitation to join the US-Russia-led Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism as an inaugural member. Members have adopted a work plan which includes the Asia-Pacific Seminar on Combating Nuclear Terrorism, a regional outreach meeting which Australia will host in Sydney in May this year.

Like others, Australia considers that balanced and progressive steps towards nuclear disarmament are vital to the continued political strength and vitality of the NPT. But we should be clear that the burden of responsibility is not the nuclear weapons states' alone. All states must contribute by ensuring an environment conducive to nuclear disarmament. A world free of nuclear weapons will not be achieved without complete and permanent assurances of non-proliferation.

Of serious concern in this context are the cases of Iran and the DPRK. Iran has committed serious violations of its NPT nuclear safeguards obligations and is continuing development of its uranium enrichment program in defiance of the IAEA Board of Governors and the UN Security Council. Iran must comply with the IAEA Board and UN Security Council resolutions including by suspending all uranium enrichment-related activities.

Australia strongly condemns the nuclear weapon test by the DPRK in October 2006. However, Australia joined many others in welcoming the statement released on 13 February following the six-party talks in Beijing which commits the DPRK to move quickly to begin resolving the serious international concerns over its nuclear program. We look forward to the DPRK matching its commitments with practical action.

We should be in no doubt that the cases of Iran and the DPRK are not just a challenge for the nuclear non-proliferation regime. They also detract from the environment of confidence essential for progress on nuclear disarmament.

Mr Chair

Australia remains committed to addressing the proliferation of illicit small arms and light weapons through the UN Program of Action (UN PoA). In addition to national measures to curb SALW proliferation, we will continue to provide practical assistance to affected states in our region. Cooperation at the international level is essential, however, if we are to stem the flow of illicit weapons and reduce their devastating impact on peoples' lives.

Despite the enormous efforts of states to rid the world of anti-personnel landmines, they continue to pose a huge humanitarian threat and a barrier to development. As current President of the Mine Ban Convention, Australia has strived to promote the universalisation and implementation of the Convention through its President's Action Plan. In 2007, Australia will support anti-personnel landmine clearance, survivor assistance and mine risk education in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Angola and Uganda.

Australia, like other countries, is concerned about the potential threat to international civil aviation posed by the acquisition and use of shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles or Man-Portable Air Defence Systems (MANPADS) by terrorist and other non-state groups.

In cooperation with others, Australia is playing a leading role in international efforts to counter the proliferation of these weapons. As the Wassenaar Arrangement's Plenary Chair in 2006, Australia conducted outreach on MANPADS to selected non-Wassenaar countries. Australia continues to work bilaterally, regionally, and multilaterally to help counter the illicit proliferation of MANPADS. These include efforts to enhance coordination of regional capacity-building assistance activities to help strengthen MANPADS export controls and stockpile management practices, and helping APEC economies with their 2005 Busan commitment to undertake MANPADS airport vulnerability assessments.

Australia believes that the irresponsible or illicit transfer of conventional arms and their components is of such grave and pressing concern that this can only be adequately addressed through the establishment of a legally binding treaty. Australia was proud to be one of the co-authors of the General Assembly resolution on an Arms Trade Treaty, and welcomes the overwhelming majority which supported the resolution at UNGA 61. We encourage all states to respond to the Secretary General by 30 April with views on the scope, feasibility and parameters of an Arms Trade Treaty.

Mr Chair, the issues discussed in this forum bear on the security interests of all states. They are too important for all Commission members not to embrace this opportunity to make practical and pragmatic contributions to address contemporary challenges. We therefore look forward to this meeting: developing practical recommendations for achieving the objectives of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons; and making meaningful progress towards agreement on practical confidence-building measures in the field of conventional weapons.

Thank you.