Statement by H.E. Dr. Sylvester Ekundayo Rowe
in the First Committee thematic debate on
Conventional weapons
Thursday 13 October 2005

Mr. Chairman,

Let me preface my statement in this thematic debate on conventional weapons by reiterating the commitment of Sierra Leone to the principles of multilateralism and universality in arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. Sierra Leone does not reject any multilateral instrument that is designed to enhance international peace and security. Any delays in the ratification of existing instrument are attributable to the sheer volume of legislation that Parliament has had to address, especially since the end of the rebel war. This Committee will recall that last year Sierra Leone ratified the CCW, its three protocols and acceded the amendment to Protocol II pertaining to mines, booby-traps and other devices. Additional Protocol IV and the Protocol on Explosive Remnants of War (ERWs).

Mr. Chairman, let me turn now to the illicit trade, circulation and use of small arms and light weapons. Instead of the usual statement, I thought it is appropriate at this time to take a slightly different approach by posing some questions.

Why are States being urged to take strong and effective action, including by legally-binding instruments, to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons, a threat to peace and international security? Why are States being urged to come up with enabling national legislation in compliance with multilateral instruments on nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction? Why is there such high level of determination being demonstrated, including through strong legal measures, to prevent terrorists from making or acquiring what are euphemistically described as “dirty bombs” (as if there are clean bombs)?

So, why has there been such reluctance on our part to come up with a legally-binding international instrument to enable States to identify and trace, in a timely manner, illicit small arms and light weapons? How do we reconcile such reluctance with the preamble of the 2001 Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat, and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects? For instance, in the Preamble didn’t we express several concerns, including grave concern about the devastating consequences of this phenomenon on children; the wide range of humanitarian and socio-economic consequences, and the serious threats it poses to peace, safety, stability and sustainable development at the individual, local, national, regional and international levels? In the Preamble didn’t we also express recognition that the illicit trade in small arms and light
weapons undermines respect for international humanitarian law? Didn’t we also recognize that it fuels crime and terrorism?

Granted, that the Programme of Action is not an International Convention. Granted, that it is a political declaration. The question is how can we translate those expressions of serious concern into something more concrete, something that is backed by the rule of law?

Mr. Chairman, if something is illicit it cannot be treated by political declarations alone. If it undermines international humanitarian law the prescription should not be limited to political declarations or declarations of intent. It must be counteracted by tough laws. The illicit trade and circulation of small arms and light weapons must be treated accordingly. And because the illicit trade is international in nature, we need international legally-binding instruments to address it. Declarations are good because they constitute programmes of action detailing what States could do to help eradicate and combat the scourge. But we must ask ourselves whether declarations are enough for illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. In the same breath we must ask ourselves, whether political declarations are enough to combat terrorism, which is also becoming another scourge in world today.

In the view of my delegation, considering its magnitude and its wide ranging consequences for millions of people world wide, we need to take a comprehensive approach in preventing, combating and eradicating the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. This is what my delegation understands by the phrase “in all its aspects.” We must see the problem not merely from a disarmament perspective, but more importantly from the perspective of its humanitarian and developmental implications.

Mr. Chairman, my delegation notes with interest the number of resolutions relating to the illicit trade and circulation of small arms and light weapons that this Committee is being asked to consider at this 60th session. It is unprecedented. We are impressed. While we share the concern expressed by other delegations that the 2005 Summit Outcome Document was silent on the vital issue of disarmament and non-proliferation, Sierra Leone welcomes the prospects that the First Committee, as the draft resolutions indicate, will articulate more than ever before the urgency, the moral imperative of dealing more effectively with the scourge of illicit trafficking and use of small arms and light weapons.

Mr. Chairman all the questions I posed were not rhetorical. They are, in the view of the Sierra Leone delegation pertinent and implicitly pregnant with ‘food for thought’. They are relevant in the context of our forthcoming review – for us it will also be an opportunity for a thorough assessment – of the 2001 United Nations Programme of Action.

In closing I would like to join others in congratulating you on your assumption of the chairmanship of the First Committee, and to reassure you of the cooperation and support of the Sierra Leone delegation.