UNGA 63 First Committee
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Thematic debate on Conventional Weapons

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(Check against delivery)

Mr Chairman

The past year has proven important in the world of conventional arms control.

After years of faltering progress, 2008 has given us a leap forward.

Australia is proud to have played a role in developing a new Convention on Cluster Munitions, ensuring a consensus report to the Group of Governmental Experts on an Arms Trade Treaty, and refocusing international attention on small arms and light weapons.

These steps show us that it is indeed possible for the international community to make progress on difficult security issues if a sufficient number of states are committed to a common goal …

… and are convinced that the time to act has come.
A new framework for Cluster Munitions

Mr Chairman

In May this year in Dublin, 107 states showed such commitment and adopted a new Convention on Cluster Munitions.

This Convention is a significant humanitarian achievement.

It prohibits cluster munitions that randomly scatter tens or hundreds of so-called submunitions that have no self-destruct capability or capacity and which pose a long-term threat to innocent civilians for years to come after hostilities have ceased.

Its ground-breaking provisions on victim assistance will deliver for the survivors of cluster munitions and their families …

… and its clearance and assistance provisions will help communities free their lands of contamination.

The Convention will also protect cooperation between nations in peace-keeping and enforcement operations.

All states involved in this process can be rightly proud of their achievement, and should now turn their common determination towards encouraging maximum signatures, rapid entry into force and full implementation of the Convention.

I am pleased to advise the Committee that Australia’s Foreign Minister, Stephen Smith, announced overnight that Australia will be among the first nations to sign the convention when it opens for signature in Oslo in early December.

We urge all delegations to join us …

… and to ensure that this valuable addition to our humanitarian and arms control architecture is swiftly operationalised.

Australia has supported the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) clearance of cluster munitions in Lebanon over the past year and Foreign Minister Smith has announced today that Australia will make a further contribution to this vital humanitarian work.

While Australia and many others are prepared to accept the prohibitions of the Convention, some major producers and users seem likely to remain outside. We will therefore continue efforts in the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons to achieve meaningful prohibitions on the use of cluster munitions by those who have not engaged in the Oslo Process.
Getting the small arms and light weapons process back on track

Mr Chairman

This year – and, in fact, this very room – witnessed a heartening turn of events for the Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons.

After the disappointing 2006 Review Conference, Australia and others worked hard to re-invigorate the PoA. Australia was one of the chairs of the Geneva Process on small arms, as well as its working group on the Biennial Meeting of States, which produced a number of papers on how to bring the PoA back on track.

We saw a fruition and realisation of these efforts at the BMS3 in July.

Australia welcomes the outcome document of this meeting, including the substantive and accurate description of the state-of-play and the innovative proposals on ‘way forward’.

The outcome document is of real and tangible benefit to Australia when tackling the threat of small arms and light weapons proliferation in our region.

We would like to commend the Chair of the meeting, Ambassador Cekuolis of Lithuania, for his exemplary chairing, his extensive preparations and consultations and his personal dedication to the subject matter.

And we congratulate Japan, Colombia and South Africa on their far-reaching and far-sighted resolution on small arms and light weapons. The resolution concretely builds on the BMS outcome document …

… and it paves the way for successful PoA implementation for years to come at the global, regional and national levels.

The trade in conventional weapons

Mr Chairman

The progress and vision we have seen on cluster munitions and small arms and light weapons is needed across the conventional arms control agenda.

An Arms Trade Treaty is greatly needed to arrest the irresponsible and illicit transfer of conventional arms and their components.

A legally binding, multilateral treaty could bring much needed transparency and accountability; codify existing best practice in the responsible transfer of conventional weapons; and prevent human rights and IHL abuse, transfers to terrorists and the destabilising accumulation of arms.

While doing this, a well-crafted Arms Trade Treaty would also provide greater assurance for legitimate trade.
Australia was a member of the Group of Governmental Experts which met this year in three sessions to examine the scope, parameters and feasibility of an Arms Trade Treaty.

We welcome the consensus report of the GGE, including the recommendation that states ensure their national systems and internal controls are of the highest possible standards...

... and the recommendation for further consideration of this issue in the UN framework.

Credit here, too, belongs to the skill of the GGE Chair, Ambassador Moritan of Argentina.

Australia is pleased to co-author the resolution on an ATT, which proposes establishing an open-ended working group in 2009 and beyond.

Step-by-step, the international community is moving towards the realisation of this vital addition to our arms control and security architecture.

Mr Chairman

Australia remains committed to the goal of a comprehensive solution to the global landmine problem.

As past President of the Mine Ban Convention, we will join the current President, Jordan, and the President-designate, Switzerland, in presenting this year the resolution on the Mine Ban Convention.

Delegations will remember that last year Australia led a panel discussion in First Committee to mark the tenth anniversary of the opening for signature of the Convention.

We can all be proud of our achievements in the last decade. Vast tracts of land have been cleared, over 40 million mines destroyed and the number of new victims continues to fall.

But our work is nowhere near complete.

All states parties to the Convention need to ensure they are fully and transparently working towards meeting their obligations under the Convention.

A key issue for the upcoming Meeting of States Parties in November will be the consideration of requests for an extension to mine clearance deadlines, pursuant to Article 5 of the Convention. We encourage affected states parties to continue in their demining efforts and to fulfil their Article 5 obligations as speedily as circumstances allow.

As a major donor state, Australia will work with all states parties to ensure ongoing, dedicated and integrated mine action...

... thereby continuing to improve the livelihood of landmine and ERW victims and realising the Convention's vision of a world free of anti-personnel mines.
Mr Chairman

The international community has banned landmines, cluster munitions and has put in place regulatory frameworks to combat the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and other conventional weapons.

But black market weapons-related activity, including illicit brokering and intermediation services, threatens our efforts and is an ever-growing feature of today’s proliferation challenge.

Such trade illegally tries to avoid national, regional and international trade controls and poses an ever-growing threat to the international community.

Weapons-related proliferation through illicit brokering can have a wide range of consequences, including prolongation of conflicts, weapons acquisition by non-state actors including terrorists and an adverse impact on sustainable development.

With these threats in mind, the Republic of Korea and Australia [have tabled/will table] a new resolution on the prevention of illicit brokering activities. It is time this important issue is placed comprehensively on the UN agenda.

The resolution covers both illicit brokering in WMD and conventional arms, focusing on this dangerous activity across the board.

The resolution affirms that brokering controls should not hamper legitimate trade and technology transfer. It calls on states to adopt national laws and measure to prevent illicit brokering, and fully implement relevant treaties, instruments, resolutions and initiatives…

… and it paves the way for strengthened international cooperation and assistance.

Mr Chairman

Australia has seen in its own region the humanitarian catastrophe of conventional arms proliferation. These weapons can hamper development and seriously threaten security and stability.

We remain committed to addressing the threat of proliferation of conventional weapons…

… including through operationalising the important steps the international community has made this year.

I thank you.