STATEMENT BY THE
DEPUTY PERMANENT
REPRESENTATIVE OF CHILE TO THE
UNITED NATIONS

AMBASSADOR ALFREDO LABBÉ

ON OCCASION OF THE FIRST
COMMITTEE’S SEGMENT ON
CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS

UNITED NATIONS

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STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR ALFREDO LABBÉ, DEPUTY PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF CHILE TO THE UNITED NATIONS, IN THE FIRST COMMITTEE'S SEGMENT ON CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS

Mr. Chairman,

Our country endorses the statement made by the distinguished delegation of Brazil on behalf of MERCOSUR and Associated States.

This year, Chile is gratified by the discussion of conventional weapons in the First Committee. And we have good reasons for this gratification: the Oslo process, launched from the diplomatic nucleus of a group of like-minded States from various regions and with various political leanings, successfully concluded the negotiation of a legally binding instrument banning cluster munitions. This represents a substantive new step towards the strengthening not only of international humanitarian law but also of the underlying approach derived from the concept of human security: in other words, the centre of gravity of multilateralism applied to security must be human beings.

However, in addition to the specific achievement of a new legal corpus which is part of both international humanitarian law and international disarmament law, there is the fact that this was achieved because its advocates, encouraged and assisted by the strong action of civil society, were able again to free themselves from the procedural limitations that are stifling the Conference on Disarmament and other organs of the disarmament machinery operating under the most extreme version of the consensus rule.

An open-ended process, following lofty political and ethical principles and spearheaded by States strongly committed to the cause of disarmament, created the diplomatic conditions for producing a concrete outcome which, as was the case with the Ottawa Convention, will have a positive impact on the lives of millions of fellow human beings. From now on, the provisions of what I assume will be familiarly known as the Oslo Convention will start to become a legal entity because, as we well know, in addition to arrangements for its entry into force, they have established with irrefutable moral force the principle that the use of cluster munitions is incompatible with the standards of a civilized society aware of the supremacy of the human being.

Above and beyond the actual content of the Convention, the Oslo process has demonstrated for the second time that there are alternative avenues for advancing in this extremely important segment of the multilateral agenda.

Chile became involved in the Oslo process at the personal behest of the President of the Republic, who had no doubt whatsoever about the need for it and its implications. In addition, this endeavour was overwhelmingly supported by our region, in which this type of instrument reflects the democratic consolidation that we have experienced in recent decades and the creation of a climate of security characterized by trust and cooperation. Inhuman contraptions of war have no place anywhere, but they are
undoubtedly incompatible with twenty-first century Latin America. This is why, Mr. Chairman, we were part of this journey throughout its itinerary of awareness-raising and negotiation, which led us from the fjord of Oslo, via Lima, Vienna and Wellington, as far as Dublin. We also supported the diplomatic campaign waged from the regional trenches, participating in conferences held in San José and Mexico City, and we shall ascend to the heights of Quito, just before the signature, this December. Our sights are now set on the proclamation of Latin America and the Caribbean as a zone free of cluster munitions. What better pendant to the Treaty of Tlatelolco could there be, Mr. Chairman, than this historic step?

Chile wishes to highlight the leadership and political courage displayed, once again, by Norway. This is an example which we must conjure up – as a kind of talisman – whenever we become frustrated in the disarmament forums. Leadership in multilateral diplomacy is, by definition, the heritage of all the members of the community of nations. With a clear perception of the global public goods to be protected, with the experience and imagination to find procedural solutions and with the necessary conviction to enlist in the endeavour others who we know share our ideals, success is possible. What is the next episode in the saga? Small arms and light weapons perhaps?

Mr. Chairman,

Another success story is the progress towards an Arms Trade Treaty. Challenging the scepticism of numerous prophets of doom, the Group of Experts skillfully led by Ambassador Roberto García Moritán managed to agree on guiding criteria for an instrument that will not only create legal security and certainty in the arms trade but will also inject into it humanitarian and human rights considerations which should have an impact on the ground, especially in areas where conflict and transnational organized crime are still leaving behind thousands of victims. Chile is co-sponsoring and strongly supports the draft resolution before us, which establishes an open-ended working group of the General Assembly to tackle negotiation of the Treaty. We shall participate in it energetically and enthusiastically.

Mr. Chairman,

Almost 11 years ago, in December 1997, Chile and a majority of States Members of the United Nations went to Ottawa to sign the Convention on the Prohibition of Anti-personnel Mines. With hindsight and seeing the results of this example, we can confidently say that the Ottawa Convention was a milestone on the road to disarmament. It produced a community and a movement, as well as an instrument. The Ottawa Convention is being implemented by its 156 States parties. This has created a community involving not only its members but also international and intergovernmental organizations and active civil society groups. The movement is characterized by transparency, inclusion and cooperation between a donor community and the States concerned, which include Chile. In our region, the Ottawa Convention has bolstered the political process of confidence-building and adoption of new concepts of security. In a historic phase in which bilateral disputes have been resolved by peaceful means, the
remaining mines bear mute but still lethal witness to not-so-distant times when some of our brother nations were on the brink of armed confrontation. In this context, demining is a symbol of what we want to be.

The Convention foresaw that the period required for mine clearance, which is intrinsically an arduous task fraught with dangers and huge costs, might need to be extended. There is nothing unusual about this and it is enough to consider compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention to confirm that the difficulty of destroying undesirable legacies affects small States as well as big Powers. What must be emphasized is that the treatment of the extension applications allowed under article 5 conforms to this Convention’s own practice and dynamic: through broad dialogue and in a spirit of serious and pragmatic cooperation. Chile has participated actively in the group analyzing these requests, which has just concluded its work in Geneva, transmitting a set of reports that will help the Meeting of States Parties to evaluate and then decide on each of the requests.

As a disarmament and international humanitarian law instrument, the Ottawa Convention has a strong section on victim assistance, which the States parties and other organizations composing the community to which I referred earlier have implemented very seriously and conscientiously. There is no doubt that the example of the Ottawa Convention in this regard was followed for the Oslo Convention, which in its approach to the issue of victims extends the scope of assistance to suffering families and communities.

Mr. Chairman,

2008 will produce a memorable crop in the area of conventional weapons. The Group of Governmental Experts on Ammunition Stockpiles in Surplus, headed with pragmatism and imagination by Ambassador Michael Hasenau, managed to agree on an important report containing guidelines based – albeit only tacitly – on the human security paradigm, which being applicable to arsenals and powder kegs ensure the safety of communities in their vicinity. Surplus stockpiles of munitions create problems ranging from storage conditions, including the additional danger posed by chemical disintegration over time, to the impact that their loss or theft could have on international and community security. The recommendations in the report should now be translated into guidelines for the provision of assistance to States which voluntarily request it in order to improve storage conditions and management and, importantly, to destroy unnecessary stockpiles without further delay.

Mr. Chairman,

The concept of surplus munitions leads us to consider once again the problems caused by the undeniable proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Kofi Annan rightly said that, measured on the basis of their destruction of lives, small arms and light weapons are comparable to weapons of mass destruction. In regions of the world affected by internal conflicts and by the scourge of terrorism and transnational organized
crime, small arms represent an immediate and highly lethal danger. The process of implementation of the United Nations Programme of Action against the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons has been hampered by the consensus rule. An overwhelming majority of States Members of the United Nations have been frustrated in their attempt to find a multilateral and regulatory response tackling the underlying issue: the proliferation of these weapons, uncontrolled trade in them and, ultimately, their impact on international and human security. How much longer?

Perhaps, Mr. Chairman, we need winds of change, cool and refreshing breezes from the Canadian plains or the Nordic fjords. Allow us to be positively provocative and to ask whether the time has not come to model the multilateral treatment of this issue on the dynamic embodied in the Ottawa and Oslo Conventions. The democracy that we advocate at the national level has its correlation in international organizations, whose democratization Chile has always supported. Democracy is government of majorities with full respect for the rights of minorities. What good reason is there to continue delaying progress towards the binding instrument that a majority of the States Members of the United Nations clearly desire?

Mr. Chairman,

I conclude by inviting the membership of this Committee to reflect on the lessons taught to us by this fruitful year. The blockage of the disarmament machinery has been overcome in the area of conventional weapons by a brave exercise of bottom-up leadership. The synergetic overlap of disarmament law and international humanitarian law and the need to safeguard human security are parameters that we can bear in mind in order to produce results that will positively affect the lives of millions of fellow human beings. We must continue to follow this road. We know that we have right on our side.

Thank you.