Mr. Michael Hasenau, Chairperson of the Group of Governmental Experts established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 61/72 to consider further steps to enhance cooperation with regard to the issue of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus


First Committee of the 63rd General Assembly
Thematic debate 'Conventional weapons', 21 October 2008

The problems arising from the accumulation of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus are of growing concern. While accurate data on the exact scale are not available, we know that the global stockpile of conventional ammunition in surplus runs into many millions of tons. The magnitude of the challenge is illustrated by the increasing frequency of accidental explosive events within ammunition storage areas worldwide, resulting in hundreds of lives lost each year.

The Group of Governmental Experts was tasked to consider further steps to enhance cooperation with regard to the issue of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus. In doing so, the Group agreed that it was the prerogative of each State to assess its conventional ammunition requirements in accordance with its legitimate security needs. It started its work from the premise that the surplus problem is largely a result of inadequate stockpile management policies and practices. States that do not effectively manage their national stockpiles risk to be unable to monitor the quality and quantity of the conventional ammunition within them. They risk to be unable to effectively address the accumulation of surplus.

Conventional ammunition stockpiles that are poorly managed pose an excessive risk because they can become unstable and threaten public safety with explosion or contamination. The Group was particularly concerned about the significant physical risk to communities from the presence of inappropriately located, and poorly stored and managed, stockpiles of ammunition.

Unsecured and poorly managed stockpiles also allow the diversion of ammunition to illicit use, which can increase fatalities arising from civil wars, insurgencies, terrorism, crime and other armed violence. Ineffective stockpile management and security can severely undermine arms embargoes and sanctions regimes. Ineffective stockpile management and poor physical security risks to facilitate access by armed non-State actors to conventional ammunition and may constitute a source of supply for the construction of improvised explosive devices. Moreover, the presence of poorly managed stockpiles of conventional ammunition poses a threat to peacekeeping operations and a serious risk to peacekeeping personnel.
The Group argues strongly that comprehensive and effective management of conventional ammunition stockpiles is the only long-term means for States to prevent the growth of surplus stockpiles and to minimize the safety and security risks that are inherent to all conventional ammunition stockpiles. Effective stockpile management has a number of basic components. They range from categorization and accounting systems that are essential to ensuring safe handling and storage and for identifying surplus, to physical security systems to discourage loss or diversion and surveillance as well as testing procedures that assess the stability and reliability of ammunition and its suitability for use by national military and security forces.

The Group considered it important to recommend a set of mutually reinforcing measures in the areas of stockpile-management, awareness-raising, capacity-building and international assistance as a basis for concerted and structured attention to the issue. These measures could be undertaken at the national, regional and global levels to address the accumulation of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus and enhance cooperation.

Owing to the nature of conventional ammunition, specific resources and cooperation programmes are required, so that surplus ammunition can be destroyed in a safe, rapid, transparent and environmentally benign way. Elements of institutional capacity-building are essential to introduce effective and efficient stockpile management processes with a long-term perspective. The Group recommends that special attention be given to the development of national staff skills through education and training.

A key element among the measures recommended by the Group departs from the lack of global model regulations or technical guidelines for the stockpile management of conventional ammunition. National legislative and regulatory frameworks, supported by effective operational procedures, are essential for effective and efficient stockpile management of conventional ammunition. They are the indispensable basis for any form of cooperation, including in particular training.

The Group is therefore of the view that technical guidelines on the management of stockpiles of conventional ammunition can greatly facilitate international cooperation. The Group sees an important role for the UN in developing such a set of international technical guidelines for conventional ammunition stockpile management. These guidelines would be available for States to use on a voluntary basis, in developing and implementing effective stockpile management and security systems and in strengthening international cooperation and assistance.

In concluding, the Group concentrates on a few key recommendations for action at the national, regional and global levels which I would like to summarize.

At the national level, the Group calls upon States to address stockpile management issues in a comprehensive manner and develop or improve legislative and regulatory frameworks that govern the safe and secure storage of stockpiles of conventional
munition. The Group also calls upon States to strengthen their support for projects and programmes to improve stockpile management and, in this context, the destruction and demilitarization of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus.

At the regional level the Group sees an important role to play for regional organizations to cooperate more thoroughly on the issue of stockpile management and the exchange of relevant information and experience - with a special focus on sustainable capacity-building, the key elements being education and training.

At the global level, the Group strongly recommends the development of technical guidelines for the stockpile management of conventional ammunition, which would be available for States to use on a voluntary basis. These guidelines would serve to assist States in improving their national stockpile management capacity, preventing the growth of conventional ammunition surpluses and addressing wider risk mitigation.

In closing, I would like to thank the members of the Group for their very constructive approach and their individual contributions to the work process which allowed the Group to come to substantive conclusions and recommendations. I also wish to express my appreciation for the support received from the staff of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs.