UNGA64: FIRST COMMITTEE

THEMATIC DEBATE: CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS

Statement by Dell Higbie
Ambassador for Disarmament

20 October 2009

Check against delivery
Mr Chairman,

The statistics surrounding the impact on civilians of conventional weapons are well-known. We must not forget, however, that these are more than simply numbers. Each instance represents a call to action to urgently address what some call the real WMD of our time. We must continue to make tangible progress on the full range of conventional weapons issues – our communities are counting on us.

Very shortly the Government of Colombia will host the second Review Conference of the Mine-Ban Convention. We look forward to working with all countries at Cartagena to strengthen the implementation of the Convention. Although the Cartagena Summit will mark the Convention’s tenth anniversary, there is still much work to be done.

It is clear that the needs of victims are not being sufficiently met in many countries and that large amounts of mined land have yet to be cleared. While the production and use of landmines, including by countries outside the Convention, has been curbed dramatically, the use of landmines by non-state actors presents an ongoing challenge. It will be important that the Review Conference addresses all these challenges in a comprehensive manner.

New Zealand welcomes the Lao PDR’s offer, as one of the countries most affected by cluster munitions, to host the first Meeting of States Parties of the Convention on Cluster Munitions next year. New Zealand’s own ratification of the Convention is well in hand and we look forward to participating in next year’s meeting in Laos. We urge all other countries to accelerate their own signature and ratification process to ensure the swift entry into force of this important Convention.

Mr Chairman,

The excessive accumulation and uncontrolled spread of illicit small arms and light weapons poses significant challenges to peace and security. We have worked with our partners in the Pacific in a number of contexts to deal with the flow of illicit arms. This is a complicated problem and one that must not be ignored. Next year’s fourth Biennial Meeting of States Parties on the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons will be an important opportunity to take stock of the challenges these weapons present. New Zealand looks forward to working with other states towards a strong outcome in 2010 under the able chairmanship of Ambassador Macedo of Mexico.

Mr Chairman,

We are grateful for Ambassador Moritan’s effective work during the course of the year in chairing the Open Ended Working Group on an Arms Trade Treaty and for his presentation to the Committee here yesterday. The Open Ended Working Group process has allowed for a full and frank airing of views. Regional meetings such as that hosted by Malaysia earlier this month, with UNIDIR and EU sponsorship, and also the one that Japan hosted have allowed our region to become much more aware of the very serious consequences of the unregulated arms trade. We are now all ready to move to the next phase in this process, namely that of substantive negotiations, and we welcome the path that L.38 has laid for this.
What the international community strongly needs is globally applicable, legally binding standards to redress the current patchwork of highly inconsistent, and sometimes non-existent, controls on weapon transfers.

The impact that the illicit arms trade continues to have on global security, armed conflict, terrorism, transnational crime, and sustainable development has been made clear during the discussions in the Open Ended Working Group. The stability and development of my region, the Pacific, has certainly been affected by this trade. But statements from members of other regions, such as Africa, bear even greater testament to the urgent need for the adoption of a strong and satisfactory treaty.

Our ATT will not be a measure with any hidden agenda or ambition of shutting down the arms trade, or of curtailing the resources which states may entirely legitimately direct toward arms purchases. It will not be an instrument seeking in any way to regulate internal transfers of weapons, nor affecting national systems of ownership and registration.

What it will do is require that exporters seek prior approval from their national authorities, and that those authorities in turn consider approving export applications against a set of standardised international criteria. This, Mr Chairman, will certainly go some considerable way to redressing the grave problems caused by the international supply and availability of illicit arms.

There has been quite a lot of discussion here in recent days about the rules of procedure which should govern the UN Conference which would in 2012 adopt our treaty. A number of delegations have argued in favour of setting aside the normal UN rules of procedure and requiring the conference to take decisions only on the basis of consensus. Indeed it is this prospect which is referenced in operational paragraph 5 of L.38.

For New Zealand’s part, Mr Chairman, we would be most content if everyone at the 2012 diplomatic conference were to be entirely happy with the treaty text put forward and did indeed want to support its adoption without a vote. A consensus outcome is most certainly the optimal one. But consensus sometimes proves elusive.

We look forward to working with all colleagues to ensure general agreement on the text of an Arms Trade Treaty and we remain grateful to the members of civil society who continue to participate so actively and constructively in the ATT process.

Thank you Mr Chairman.