2015 UNGA First Committee
Debate on Conventional Weapons
Austrian Statement

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Mr. Chairman,

Austria aligns herself with the statement delivered by the European Union earlier during this debate. In the following, I would like to highlight a few priority issues for Austria.

The prevention of human suffering and assistance to victims of armed conflict and armed violence must remain at the heart of our efforts. UNSC Res. 1325 (2000) was the first to address the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women. Since then, the international awareness and response to the gender implications of weapons, armed violence and armed conflict has developed further, but much remains to be done. The gender implications of specific types of weapons, including conventional weapons, are issues that deserve more attention and focus in research and in the political debate. A gender perspective should be incorporated in all disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation efforts. The full and equal participation of women and men at all stages and levels of decision-making should be ensured.

As one of the first States that have signed and ratified the Arms Trade Treaty, Austria welcomes the speedy entry into force of the Treaty on 24 December 2014. The First Conference of States Parties in Cancun in August this year has defined the institutional frame for an effective implementation and the universalisation of the ATT. We are convinced that this will make an important contribution to human security, human rights and development, and also contribute significantly to countering gender-based violence.

The indiscriminate effects and unacceptable humanitarian consequences of anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions have led to these weapons being banned. Nevertheless, these indiscriminate weapons continue to cost human life and cause human tragedy. This underlines the necessity of the full universalization of the Mine Ban Convention and the Convention on Cluster Munitions. Austria reiterates that the obligation to protect civilians from unnecessary harm applies to all States.

The recent First Review Conference of the Convention on Cluster Munitions gave an opportunity to take stock of the first successful five
years of the Convention, now counting almost one hundred States Parties. By adopting a political declaration and the Dubrovnik Action Plan, the Conference created important guidance for future work in the framework of the Convention. Austria was pleased to contribute as Coordinator together with Chile to advance the effective cooperation and assistance between all relevant stakeholders and across regions. At the same time, Austria remains seriously concerned about reports of continuous use of cluster munitions in a number of countries. We call on all actors to refrain from the use of these indiscriminate weapons.

Austria would also highlight specifically the concern about the use of explosive weapons in populated areas as a major cause of civilian harm in many countries. An increasing number of governments shares this concern. Civilian casualties from explosive weapons in urban settings amounted to a recorded global number of more than 40,000 deaths and injuries in 2014 alone, dramatically higher than military casualties. This is a humanitarian problem of extreme gravity and a severe challenge for the protection of civilians in armed conflict as stipulated by international humanitarian law. Neither is it a problem that can be restricted to a limited number of conflict zones. The growing numbers of refugees that are currently leaving their war-ridden home regions testify to this. Many people are desperate to find shelter abroad, precisely from the violence and the use of explosive weapons in their countries of origin and the lack or breakdown of protection for civilian populations.

Recently, Austria and UN-OCHA jointly convened an international expert meeting on this problem in Vienna with around twenty States, the ICRC, various UN agencies, as well as civil society represented. This meeting highlighted the importance of awareness raising on the basis of continuing collection and dissemination of data, as well as the sharing and promotion of States’ good practices in using explosive weapons. Moreover, significant support was expressed among participants for the proposal to start working on an international political declaration to prevent civilian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. The United Nations Secretary General has encouraged States in his latest report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict to engage constructively in such an initiative.
Mr. Chairman,

Before I conclude, let me put on record here one more concern of my country. This is the prospect of development of lethal autonomous weapons systems. While this may seem a more distant threat in comparison with those just mentioned, technological innovation is moving fast. We risk crossing a very dangerous threshold with these technological developments. We should be very careful to make sure that the application of such technology is consistent with ethical, political and legal imperatives. That is why we are with those who are in favor of not only continuing, but deepening and intensifying the ongoing international debate about lethal autonomous weapons systems.

Thank you.