STATEMENT BY SOUTH AFRICA DURING THE THEMATIC DEBATE ON CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS

26 October 2015

Chairperson,

In view of time constraints, I will limit my remarks to only some issues under this cluster and will also delivered an abbreviated version of the statement that will be posted on Quickfirst.

Chairperson,

In August 2015, the First Conference of States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) was held in Cancun, Mexico. This marked a milestone in the progress towards the implementation of the ATT. Since its adoption in 2013, the swift entry-into-force of the ATT and the large and growing number of States Parties to the Treaty bear testimony to the fact that many countries around the globe share the common vision and goals of achieving peace, security, stability, democracy and development. The ATT sets high norms and criteria that States will adhere to when considering arms transfers and will, therefore, also aim to prevent the illicit conventional arms trade, which exacerbates conflict and crime, especially in Africa.

Its full and effective implementation will tangibly contribute to promoting international and regional peace, security and stability, as well as to reduce human suffering, by addressing the scourge of armed violence, much too often directed at innocent women and children. The central pillar of the ATT is premised on the requirement that prospective States Parties should establish, where it does not already exist, effective national conventional arms transfer control legislation, together with the requisite dedicated conventional arms control systems. In this regard, South Africa’s ratification of the ATT underscores my Government’s continued and firm commitment to fulfill its international role as a responsible manufacturer, possessor and trader in conventional arms.

A number of important decisions relating to the operationalization of the ATT were taken during the First Conference of States Parties. In this context, we welcome the appointment of our compatriot, Mr Dumisani Dladla as the Head of the ATT Secretariat for the next year and wish him well with the important task of establishing a well-functioning Secretariat that will be able to effectively serve States Parties in the implementation of their obligations under the ATT. South Africa calls on all States which have not yet done so, especially the major conventional arms producing and exporting countries, to ratify or accede to the Treaty in order to further promote its universalization.

South Africa recognizes that there are potential synergies between the ATT and other existing UN reporting mechanisms on conventional arms. It is for this reason that we would strongly urge States that may not have regularly submitted reports to the UN Register of Conventional Arms in the recent past, to do so. States Parties to the ATT may choose to draw upon the major elements of their annual reports in order to complete and submit their annual reports to the UN Register as well.

Chairperson,

South Africa is pleased to announce that earlier this year we became the 92nd State Party to the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM). We participated, for the first time, as a State Party in the First Review Conference held last month. South Africa’s decision to join the Convention was informed by our conviction that these weapons have not only become obsolete as weapons of modern warfare, but that their recent use in conflicts have shown
them to cause unacceptable harm to civilians, even long after the cessation of active hostilities. It is a sad reality that suffering on the African Continent has often been caused by weapons that are manufactured elsewhere in the world. We should therefore redouble our efforts to convince and bring into the fold those that have yet to accede to the Convention, particularly the major users and producers of cluster munitions.

Chairperson,

Informal discussions on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) have been taking place within the Certain Conventional Weapons Convention (CCW) for the last few years. From these informal discussions we have garnered a better understanding of LAWS, but many unanswered questions remain. For South Africa, a key question that should be of concern to all of us is whether these new technologies would be compliant with the rules of International Humanitarian Law, including those of distinction, proportionality and military necessity, as well as their potential impact on human rights. The concept of “meaningful human control” is something that my delegation is supportive of. In our view, there should always be meaningful human control in questions of life and death. It is therefore imperative that we deepen our understanding of the degree of human oversight or control that “autonomous weapons” – and even those of that are reportedly “semi-autonomous” – would require.

Chairperson,

On the issue of small arms and light weapons, South Africa participated in the Second Small Arms Meeting of Governmental Experts (MGE2) on the Implementation of the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, held in New York during June 2015. My delegation remains committed to the full implementation of the UN Programme of Action as a viable global consensus instrument to combat the illicit trade in these weapons.

MGE2 was very technical in nature, focusing on new technologies on the marking of new weapons being produced by States, amongst which are non-traditional small arms being held by developing countries. The meeting centred on the many challenges that are involved in keeping track of the latest trends in marking, particularly polymer weapons and the difficulties that this pose to record-keeping, tracing and stockpile management.

South Africa was pleased at the emphasis placed on the issue of international cooperation and assistance, including the transfer of technology in terms of the latest developments, and the expressed need for continued interaction amongst States, particularly in affording developing States an opportunity to gain greater access to the challenges posed to them by these modern technologies.

During this session, South Africa is honoured to introduce, on behalf of the other two main sponsors and co-authors, Colombia and Japan, the annual draft resolution entitled, “The illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects”. It is our hope that this draft resolution will again be adopted by consensus in the First Committee.

I thank you, Chairperson.