High Representative’s briefing to the Meeting of the Security Council on small arms and light weapons

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Mr. President,

Distinguished members of the Security Council,

Ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset, allow me to express my gratitude to Japan for convening this meeting on the issue of small arms and light weapons and for giving me the opportunity to brief. I welcome the Security Council’s commitment to consider small arms on a regular basis.

At a time of deepening regional tensions, expanding terrorist and criminal networks and traditional and non-traditional conflicts wreaking havoc on communities, it is important that Council members are meeting to discuss one of the key determinants of crises—small arms, light weapons and their ammunition.

In this context, I am pleased to offer some remarks this afternoon, including some reflection on the latest report of the Secretary-General just circulated to Council members.

Given the wide-ranging impact of the misuse and illicit circulation of small arms and light weapons, the previous report of the Secretary-General from 2015 recommended that the Security Council consistently address the arms situation when considering both geographic and thematic issues on its agenda (S/2015/289). I can only reiterate this recommendation here today.

The issue of small arms and light weapons is so essential to the full spectrum of the Council’s work, that this body requested the Secretary-General to include in reports and briefings on country-specific situations more comprehensive and detailed information and recommendations relating to the impact of the illicit transfer, destabilizing accumulation and misuse of small arms and light weapons (S/RES/2220 (2015)). I would certainly support this practice and encourage broader and deeper mainstreaming of relevant arms and ammunition considerations into the Council’s work.

While the Council has addressed small arms in the framework of its thematic and country-specific agenda items, its decision to take up this matter as a stand-alone agenda item, first in 1999, has created a new avenue that allows for an inclusive and comprehensive approach to small arms. This inclusive approach is vital given the relevance of small arms to a range of contexts of—from arms embargoes, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, or DDR, child soldiers and counter-terrorism, to the protection of civilians in armed conflict and transnational organized crime. The multi-dimensional and cross-cutting nature of small arms is indisputable. The biennial reports of the Secretary-General, issued in 2008, 2011, 2013, 2015 and now 2017, offer a wealth of reflections that demonstrate just how critical small arms, light weapons and their ammunition are in the context of threats to international peace and security.

While the focus of the report of the Secretary-General and my remarks here today is on small arms, recent Council discussions on the use of heavy weapons and their impact on civilians are also demonstrative of the increasing salience of addressing conventional arms more broadly in contemporary conflicts. Furthermore, in many countries, attacks using improvised explosives now kill and injure civilians and combatants more than any other type
of weapon. Effectively dealing with this growing threat requires a comprehensive approach, including action by the Security Council. I would encourage Council members to continue considering the role of all types of conventional arms in perpetuating conflict and in contributing to its humanitarian toll.

Mr. President,

I would now like to turn to the substance of the Secretary-General’s report and highlight some salient points he raises in the substantive trends and developments section. The Secretary-General recounts various trends and developments organized by substantive theme—inter alia the protection of civilians and human rights; terrorism and violent extremism; and United Nations support to weapons and ammunition management, among others. He offers to the Council members a useful reflection on how small arms and light weapons, as well as their ammunition, impact threats to peace and security and notes various actions taken, including by this very body, to address these challenges. Like previous ones, this report paints a vivid picture of how extensive the implications of small arms and light weapons can be in the context of the Council’s work.

While the report notes some successes achieved in the past two years, the global picture of small arms is nonetheless sobering.

The impact of the wide availability, misuse and destabilizing accumulation of small arms is vast and well-documented. A significant portion of direct-conflict deaths are attributable to the use of small arms, and nearly half of all violent deaths are nowadays caused by firearms. Significantly, the rate of firearms-related homicides in post-conflict societies frequently outnumbers battlefield deaths.

Small arms are force multipliers whose availability, ownership and use contribute to the initiation and sustainment of conflict and they can facilitate all forms of conflict, including civil wars, inter-State conflict as well as the perpetration of violent crimes. They are key determinants in the lethality and longevity of conflicts.

Allow me to offer three key observations. First, arms flow into conflict-affected and violence-ridden societies exacerbate already-fragile circumstances. It is important that the Council remains cognizant of the destructive effect of weapons and ammunition flows into these settings. By way of example, I note the decision of the Security Council to empower the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei to confiscate and destroy weaponry and report on possible arms movements into the Abyei Area through resolution 2287 (2016). This mandate is an effective response to the previous recognition by the Council of the threat posed to peace and security in the Abyei Area arising from the illicit transfer, destabilizing accumulation and misuse of small arms and light weapons.

Second, high levels of illicit arms and ammunition in circulation also contribute to violations of international humanitarian and international human rights law. Small arms are often used in the commission of human rights violations such as killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence, torture and the recruitment of children. More human rights violations and abuses are committed with them than with any other.

weapon—from recruitment of children as soldiers to sexual violence acts perpetrated in conflict. Small arms are often a common denominator in these circumstances. United Nations personnel are not immune from such tragedies. Small arms frequently play a role in the deaths of United Nations employees and peacekeepers, as well as workers from humanitarian and non-governmental organizations. The human cost of the illicit transfer, destabilizing accumulation and misuse of small arms runs deep.

Third, of growing concern are the increased links between transnational organised crime, illicit small arms trafficking and terrorism, as well as the mounting use of the Internet including the “dark web”, and of emerging technologies for illicit trafficking and production. The use of illicit previously-deactivated firearms in the terror attacks in Paris in November 2015 is evidence of the need to restrict the supply of all types of weapons to terrorist groups.

In this context, I welcome the work of the Council, including adoption of 2370 (2017), on denying terrorists access to weapons and urging States to undertake the necessary national measures to eliminate this supply. The issue of improvised explosive devices is of course of relevance in this regard and I would underscore in particular the potential diversion of ammunition and explosives for the manufacture of such devices.

On a positive note, weapons and ammunition management has become a critical component of United Nations peacekeeping operations and in Security Council activities to address conflict-affected situations more generally. Attention to this issue was often reflected in DDR programmes or physical security and stockpile management activities. For example, in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mali, DDR components have established weapon registration and marking systems to ensure the traceability of all weapons and ammunition collected during the DDR process. This is a welcome trend. The United Nations stands ready to continue supporting States in this regard. I would like to point out the table in the report of the Secretary-General that provides several examples of United Nations support to managing arms and ammunition in peacekeeping settings.

Mr. President,

I would like to highlight the table of recommendations included as Annex I of the report under the Council’s consideration. The table represents an effort to assist States in operationalization of many of the small-arms-related recommendations that have been previously made to the Council through the 4 previous reports of the Secretary-General on this topic. While the majority of actions are directed towards States, either the Council members or the broader UN membership, the Secretary-General also identifies actions for the United Nations system and relevant entities.

48 concrete recommendations have been made to the Council on how best to address small arms, light weapons and ammunition in the context of this organ’s work. Many of these recommendations remain highly relevant. While not all 48 recommendations are included in the table, the table represents a solid mix of suggested actions on the key areas of concern for the Council—including weapons and ammunition management; peacekeeping; arms embargoes; community safety and law enforcement; protection of civilians; and armed violence. Consideration is also given to gender mainstreaming, and to the value of applying international standards and guidelines.
The actions suggested are intended to be as concrete and specific as possible. I would encourage Council members to review the suggested actions identified by the Secretary-General and to consider their operationalization.

Annex II of the report is submitted to the Council pursuant to the request made in resolution 2220 (2015) for the Secretary-General to compile best practices and arrangements that could be used by United Nations peacekeeping operations and other relevant Council-mandated entities to guide the implementation of tasks related to arms embargoes. The Secretary-General has examined various mechanisms the United Nations has instituted in its field missions and drawn best practices from those experiences for the consideration of Council members.

Mr. President,

I would be remiss if I did not underscore the particular significance of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its relationship to peace and security. In a 1999 Presidential Statement, the Security Council acknowledged “that the challenges posed by small arms is multi-faceted and involves security, humanitarian and development dimensions” (S/PRST/1999/28). This statement could be seen as a foreshadowing of the critical acknowledgement in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the inextricable link between peace and development.

The report of the Secretary-General on small arms notes the significance of the Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, because of their explicit recognition of the link between arms regulation and development, as well as between illicit trafficking in arms and organized crime. As you are aware, one of the targets under Goal 16 includes a significant reduction in illicit arms flows.

As the Secretary-General points out in his report—the significance of target 16.4 is threefold. First, it closely connects adequate arms regulation with proper functioning institutions, which thereby ensure sustainability of implementation over the long-term. Second, by virtue of this target, States have acknowledged that arms regulation is not only relevant for national security and defence sectors, but it also benefits communities by mitigating the proliferation of illicit weaponry thus creating the security conditions conducive to social and economic development. And, thirdly, the new development agenda demonstrates that arms regulation, more than ever, should be pursued through policies and actions anchored in measurability. The Secretary-General encourages the integration of measurability in all small-arms-control-related activities and has suggested that the development of indicators on this topic in the context of the SDGs is an excellent means of monitoring concrete, demonstrable signs of progress towards a specific goal.

While Goal 16 is the most explicit in recognizing the relationship between peace and development, the entirety of the 2030 Agenda can be viewed in the framework of peace. States at the Sixth Biennial Meeting of States to Consider the Programme of Action noted that the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons has implications of the realization of several SDGs in addition to 16, including those related to poverty reduction, economic growth, health, gender equality and safe cities. As the development agenda was intended to be a comprehensive, inclusive framework, the mainstreaming of security-related issues into implementation efforts is logical.
Mr. President,

Before I close, with your permission, I would like to say a word on the Secretary-General’s approach to conventional weapons, including small arms. The Secretary-General is deeply committed to crisis prevention, which he has placed at the centre of his reform agenda. We believe that investing in effective management of small arms and light weapons, including their ammunition, is to invest in conflict prevention. Disarmament and arms control are key enablers of sustainable peace and have long played a role in preventing conflict, easing international tensions and creating space for dialogue and because of the breadth and depth of their impact, adequate controls for small arms and their ammunition are vital. When armed conflict rages, effective arms and ammunition management is imperative. When international security is challenged, this is precisely when such control efforts should be pursued with even greater urgency.

I thank you for your attention.