Group of Governmental Experts on Problems Arising from the Accumulation of Conventional Ammunition Stockpiles in Surplus

Opening remarks by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
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Distinguished Experts,

I am pleased to open the first session of the group of governmental experts on problems arising from the accumulation of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus, established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 72/55.

At the outset, I wish to congratulate each of you on your nomination to participate in the work of this Group. Groups of governmental experts remain an important mechanism for exploring substantive issues with a view to determining possible next steps in the framework of the General Assembly. The matter of conventional ammunition is no exception. Multilateral consideration of this issue benefitted greatly from the work of a GGE in 2008. I am confident this Group will have a similar, positive impact.

The diversity of backgrounds present in this room will be a tremendous asset to your discussions. The Group has at its disposal impressive expertise in the areas of international security, diplomacy, law, criminal justice and military affairs. This combination will surely serve the Group well in carrying out its mandate—to consider matters relevant to problems arising from the accumulation of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus, taking into account the exchanges in open, informal consultations in 2018 and 2019.

I am also pleased to acknowledge that this Group has achieved compositional gender parity. This is a tremendous achievement and indicative of the positive trend of enhancing the role of women in all disarmament, nonproliferation and arms control discussions.

The Secretary-General remains deeply committed to the full and equal participation of women in all decision-making processes related to disarmament and international security. The Office for Disarmament Affairs will continue to actively support the implementation of this commitment.

Turning now to the substance of your work, comprehensively addressing the safety and security challenges posed by the accumulation of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus is an urgent priority.
As recognized by the Secretary-General in his Agenda for Disarmament, inadequately-maintained stockpiles constitute considerable humanitarian dangers, especially when located in populated areas. Explosions at ammunition depots can cause death and injury alongside serious environmental and financial damage. Over the past five decades, more than 600 such explosions have occurred affecting thousands of people in 101 countries. Poor ammunition management can also result in diversion to the illicit market, thereby destabilizing regions and jeopardizing peace and security. The explosive character of ammunition is particularly attractive for the manufacture of improvised explosive devices.

While the challenges are considerable, much progress has already been made. Since the conclusion of the work of the 2008 GGE on conventional ammunition, we have seen the development of the International Ammunition Technical Guidelines, or IATG, and the establishment of the Ammunition Management Advisory Team. The increasingly-wide dissemination of the IATG, coupled with dedicated international assistance, has greatly contributed to improved ammunition management practices and policies.

The regular adoption of the General Assembly resolution on conventional ammunition, first tabled as a draft decision in 2004, has allowed for consistent consideration of the issue in a pragmatic manner. This resolution has served as an important vehicle for addressing surplus assessments and international assistance, with a view to preventing explosions and combatting diversion. At the same time, it has dynamically reflected the work of the UN SaferGuard Programme and its role as the knowledge management platform for conventional ammunition in the United Nations. The UN SaferGuard Programme continues to make strides towards the expansion of resources to support countries in the application of the IATG as well as ensuring the Guidelines themselves are thus fit-for-purpose. The next version of the IATG will be released this year in 2020. Significant progress has already been made in ensuring the guidance reflects evolving norms and practices in ammunition stockpile management.

Against this backdrop, the General Assembly, through resolution 72/55, decided to elevate the issue of conventional ammunition by providing a framework for informal consultations ahead of the convening of this Group. I wish to congratulate Germany for its leadership over this process and the commendable dedication shown to ensuring this informal process was both inclusive and comprehensive. I welcome the overall trend of combining the
establishment of groups of governmental experts alongside more inclusive mechanisms.

The six informal consultations on conventional ammunition held throughout 2018 and 2019 have provided a solid foundation for this Group’s work—covering matters from technical aspects of stockpile management to international cooperation and capacity-building to prevention of diversion through life-cycle management. I invite this Group, therefore, to draw upon the considerable pool of knowledge generated over the course of this two-year consultative process. The UNIDIR-organized thematic seminars provided further food-for-thought as did the regional outreach activities supported by the Government of Germany.

The central themes that emerged from the informal consultative process are well reflected in the “Indicative Timetable” for this session, including the dual concerns of safety and security associated with conventional ammunition; applicable legal and normative frameworks; physical security and stockpile management; and prevention of diversion.

I trust there will be robust discussions on all these aspects, and I look forward to the Group’s outcome. The Office for Disarmament Affairs stands ready to fully support the deliberations.