Weapons Contamination: Addressing Key Challenges to Meeting Clearance Deadlines Under the Mine Ban Convention and Convention on Cluster Munitions

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Opening Remarks by

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Let me start by expressing my sincere gratitude for your presence in this meeting on Weapons contamination: Addressing key challenges to meeting clearance deadlines under the mine ban convention and convention on cluster munitions. I also want to thank the ICRC for their generosity in making this meeting a success. The cooperation between the African union Commission and the ICRC, especially in area of landmines, has endured the test of time, and I believe it shall stand until we achieve the ultimate objective of eradicating landmines in the AU Member States.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

In recent years, the number of landmine victims worldwide, and in AU Member States, has decreased. Thousands of landmine survivors have been rehabilitated and vast areas of contaminated land have been released back to the public for use after clearance. Yet despite these gains, tens of millions of landmines remain a threat, and our communities continue to suffer - presenting a major obstacle to economic recovery and development. Indeed, this affects development of tourism and farming among other uses of the land.

Landmine survivors are affected physically and psychologically. Many lose their ability to make a living as a result of loss of limbs, and physical and psychological rehabilitation takes a long time.

We are here to share ideas about these hidden and indiscriminate killers, which cannot tell the difference between the footsteps of a soldier, and those of a child.
The Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction, or the Mine Ban Treaty, remains the framework that the African Union, and the world at large, use to eradicate landmines by prohibiting the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of antipersonnel mines.

African Union Member States are committed to ensuring that Africa is landmine free. As far back as 1995, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), in conjunction with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), organized three seminars to raise awareness of the landmines problem among Member States. This resulted into Resolution CM/Res 1593(LXII) that was adopted by the 62nd Ordinary Session of the OAU Council of Ministers meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from 21-23 June 1995 in which it expressed concern over the tragic consequences of resulting from the indiscriminate use of antipersonnel landmines, and the fact that Africa is the continent with the largest number of landmines, and urged Member States to contribute towards the clearance of landmines and other unexploded munitions.

Subsequently, the OAU, in co-operation with the South African Government, organized the first Continental Conference of African Experts on landmines. This conference entitled “Towards a Landmine-Free Africa: The OAU and the Legacy of Anti-Personnel Mines” was held in May 1997 in Kempton Park, South Africa. A Plan of Action that commits the Member States to the elimination of all anti-personnel landmines in Africa and the establishment of the continent as an Anti-Personnel Landmine-Free Zone was developed. It was endorsed by the 66th Ordinary Session of the OAU Council of Ministers held in Harare, Zimbabwe, in May 1997. Member States have subsequently met at expert level, and shared experiences in meeting their obligations under the Treaty.

It is noted that the Treaty stipulates that a State party to the Treaty is expected to clear all of its mined areas within ten years after ratifying it. However, a number of countries have not been able to meet this requirement, and have had to reschedule their deadlines by making extension requests.

It is partly for this reason the Commission has since changed the approach from providing forums for exchange of information and experiences to assistance and cooperation in actual
activities in areas including destruction of stockpiles, mine clearance, mine risk education and victim assistance. To this end, a few Member States will receive demining equipment sometime this year. The Commission is also consulting with partners so as to mobilizes support in other areas like victim assistance.

Whereas 10 AU Member States have met their clearance obligations under the treaty (which include Malawi, Swaziland, Tunisia, Rwanda, Zambia, Burundi, the Republic of Congo, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Uganda), it is disturbing to note that there have been reports of new mine fields in Mali and Libya as a result of the recent conflicts. In this regard, I wish to urge Member States, and the international community at large to tighten controls to ensure that non-state actors do no gain access to landmines. There is need for cooperation and synergy in this respect.

The Commission considers intra-African cooperation as critical and will continue to support Member States in their efforts to fulfill their obligations under the Treaty. Certainly, this meeting offers us the opportunity to share experiences, to network, highlight challenges and make recommendations. This is the reason we have in our midst countries that have accomplished their clearance obligations. My colleagues will present to you the key areas that the Commission has prioritized in this regard.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

Let me end by, once again, welcoming you to this meeting. I hope that this forum will unite us in the elimination of anti-personnel landmines which should be a part of a comprehensive, coordinated effort from all stakeholders.

I thank you for your attention.