SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS MEETING ON THE ARMS TRADE TREATY (ATT)

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KEYNOTE SPEECH BY

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AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION
Excellencies, Ambassadors and Representatives of AU Member States

Excellencies, Representatives of the United Nations, the European Union and International Partners,

Distinguished Representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations and Research Groups,

Esteemed Media Representatives,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to welcome you to this very important meeting that seeks to provide a forum for exchange of views regarding an issue that remains a major concern for AU Member States, that is, the need for strong mechanisms for oversight, transparency and control over global transfers of weapons. Your presence here today is further proof of your support this mechanism.

Six months ago, on 24 December 2014, the Arms Trade Treaty entered into force, following years of negotiations. As a multilateral, legally-binding agreement establishing common standards for the international trade of conventional weapons, peace lovers, including AU Member States, for the first time, saw an answer to the poorly regulated global trade in conventional weapons

The need for regulated arms trade remains abundantly clear. The illicit and irresponsible trade, proliferation and circulation of conventional weapons have devastating and wide reaching consequences. Their negative impact ranges from undermining and hindering conflict management, resolution and peace-keeping efforts during conflicts, to reconstruction and development in post-conflict situations.

Conventional weapons in the wrong hands contribute to large scale suffering, destruction and human rights violations including unlawful killings, violence against women and children, forced recruitment of children, pillaging, maiming, displacements and attacks against peace-keepers and humanitarian workers.
For AU Member States, the inclusion of small arms and light weapons in the scope of the Treaty was important. This is because they continue to be the weapons of choice in intra-State armed conflicts and other forms of armed violence that continue to plague the African continent.

As of today, 37 AU Member States have signed the Treaty and 10 have ratified it. Clearly there is still more work to be done as this is not a true reflection of the strong support that African Union Member States had for the Treaty since the negotiations began up to its adoption. The continent was a committed supporter throughout the process and has taken pride in working with the international community in order to achieve this landmark Treaty.

This commitment was expressed through the African Common Position on an ATT. It can be recalled that the Common Position was called for by the 17th AU Summit of July 2011 and was developed through a series of consultations with Member States and Regional Economic Communities. The Common Position was subsequently endorsed by the 20th Summit of January 2013. The scope and standards called for by the Common Position were in fact higher than those eventually included in the Treaty. We recognize the dynamics and realities of intergovernmental negotiations processes and the fact that compromises had to be made in order to achieve agreement. But this should not prevent us from applying the highest standards possible to realize the object and purpose of the Common Position and the Treaty.

It is with the same steadfastness that we must work towards the universalization of the Treaty on the continent. We should recognize however that it is not enough to sign, or even ratify it. States, among other things, must establish and implement not only effective export regimes but also import regimes so that there are adequate controls and transparency measures in place by governments to prevent unlawful diversion and contribute to the confidence building measures the Treaty aims to provide.
We have already made substantial progress in addressing the illicit proliferation and circulation of small arms and light weapons within the framework of the United Nations Programme of Action, the International Tracing Instrument and the Firearms Protocol. This is in addition to the important work done within the framework of the regional instruments, such as the ECOWAS and Kinshasa Conventions, and the Nairobi and SADC protocols.

I would like to stress here that the Arms Trade Treaty does not replace, take priority over, nor should it distract from the implementation of other commitments under the international and regional instruments. We must understand that the Treaty complements these instruments. It will help us build on the progress already made as it represents a tool that we must use effectively to address the larger challenges it aims to respond to.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

In order to fully achieve the objectives of the Treaty, we must be clear about what it provides and what it doesn’t provide. The Treaty does not undermine the sovereign right of states to conduct responsible arms transfers or provide for their national defense. It is about reducing the risk of using international transfers of conventional arms to violate international humanitarian law and human rights law, or to facilitate transnational organized crime and terrorism.

This is a responsibility that lies upon all of us, both exporting and importing states. The Treaty’s universal scope has provided a framework for all states, including those that experience the adverse effects of irresponsible arms transfer, to be involved in a global dialogue as well as in the development and future shaping of global norms that uphold and demand responsible arms transfers. This will consequently ensure that the standards outlined in the Treaty are continuously improved.
It is for these reasons that the African Union is convening this meeting to assist Member States in making informed decisions regarding the ratification and implementation of the ATT, thus contributing to national and regional efforts to address the illicit and irresponsible trade in, and diversion of, conventional weapons.

The aim is to understand the envisioned role of the Treaty in regulating the international trade in conventional arms through better understanding of States Parties’ obligations and the standards set by the Treaty. We also hope that the meeting will help us situate the Treaty within the current international and regional framework to prevent illicit arms proliferation and assess it potential impact on state practice.

The second objective of this meeting is to understand and discuss the expectations of the First Conference of States parties to the Treaty, which will be held in Mexico City in August 2015. This includes the agenda of the conference and the status and outcomes of the ongoing preparatory process.

The Conference of States Parties will provide the primary forum to continuously reflect and deliberate on the implementation of the Treaty and work collectively to improve its standards. I therefore urge States Parties to actively engage in the First and future Conferences.

In this regard, I would like to thank Mexico, in its capacity as the provisional secretariat of the Treaty, as well as the Facilitators and Co-Facilitators of the different Working Groups - Ghana, Sweden and France - for joining the meeting to brief us about the status of the preparatory process, the discussions that have taken place and the different proposals made regarding the Secretariat’s structure and budget, the Rules of Procedure of the Conferee, reporting under the Treaty, and other relevant aspects.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the European Union for its generous financial support that has allowed the convening of this meeting. The partnership between the African Union
Union and the European Union is based on a mutual and strong commitment to regional and international peace and stability.

Last but not least, I wish to thank the United Nations and its Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa for its invaluable contribution to this meeting and the expertise provided.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

In concluding, I wish to encourage you all to make the best of this platform to learn from the facilitators and from one another and share your views, concerns and experiences on the matter so as to enable us move forward, in a collective and mutually reinforcing manner, towards realizing the object and purpose of the Treaty and the international and regional frameworks on controlling the illicit proliferation and trafficking of conventional weapons.

Thank you.