COMMEMORATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR MINE AWARENESS AND ASSISTANCE IN MINE ACTION

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KEYNOTE SPEECH
BY
MR. EL-GHASSIM WANE
DIRECTOR FOR PEACE AND SECURITY
Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General, Mr Haile Menkerios,

Head of the ICRC delegation to the AU and International organizations in Africa, Mr. Felipe Donoso,

Head of Peace and Security Section of the European Union Delegation to the AU, Mr. Jean-François Haspérué,

Excellences, Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives of Member States and International Partners,

Distinguished Representatives of United Nations agencies, International and Non-Governmental Organizations,

Esteemed Media Representatives,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The observance of the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action is an important opportunity to collectively reflect on the threat posed by anti-personnel landmines, celebrate the progress we have achieved to eliminate their danger and renew our commitment to overcoming the challenges we face.

Anti-personnel landmines pose tremendous humanitarian and development problems and have serious and lasting social and economic consequences for the populations of affected countries. Not only does the impact of landmines continue after conflict but their victims far exceed those who come in contact with them.

Landmines remain scattered as hidden killers in several AU member States killing and severely maiming civilians, with children being disproportionately affected. In 2013, a hundred and eleven civilians were killed in Somalia and South Sudan alone. Sixty-two of those were children.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite this grim picture, there are many important and encouraging developments which have taken place on the continent towards realizing the core aims of the 1997 Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention. Today presents us with an ideal opportunity to celebrate and reflect on this progress.

In terms of adherence, the continent’s commitment to the object and purpose of the Convention is unquestionable - 98% of AU Member States have ratified it between 1997 and 2012. The city of Maputo in Mozambique is considered among the birthplaces of the anti-landmines movement and has hosted the First Meeting of the States Parties in 1999. The Continent also hosted two of the three Review Conferences of the Convention that have taken place to date. The first was hosted in Nairobi in 2004 and the third in Maputo last year.

With regard to clearing mined areas, and despite the serious challenges faced, the Implementation Support Unit of the Convention reports that 12 of the 26 AU Member States that have reported areas known or suspected to contain anti-personnel mines have completed clearance activities. The remaining 14 AU Member States continue to work in a transparent and collaborative manner with the relevant oversight mechanisms established by the Convention as well as the international partners towards meeting their mine clearance obligations by the set deadlines.

Last but not least, assisting the victims remains at the core of the Convention and requires efforts that continue long after the destruction of stockpiles and clearance of mined areas. These efforts also correspond to AU member States’ obligations pursuant to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In this regard, and over the past few years, Member States have undertaken various steps to enhance victims’ access to healthcare and rehabilitation as well as to enable their participation in all aspects of life, including
civic, social, economic and political activities. I would like to take the opportunity to overview some of these commendable steps.

In enhancing health care coverage, Sudan, Algeria, and Senegal have introduced plans to extend coverage of national health insurance to include persons with disabilities.

In terms of rehabilitation, Angola initiated a nationally funded physical rehabilitation project to improve the quality of services and introduced basic physiotherapy and rehabilitation services in several referral hospitals. Mozambique on the other hand resumed production of prosthetic devices. Even in Somalia, orthopedic centers continued to provide services for persons with disabilities despite the multitude of challenges. To further enhance access, Guinea Bissau and Sudan launched monthly outreach services for people living in rural areas while Ethiopia administered special rehabilitation programs for refugees with disabilities.

To ensure the participation of the victims and persons with disabilities in social and economic life, countries such as Angola, Sudan, and Uganda introduced legislation, codes, and guides on physical accessibility and construction regulation.

Furthermore, and in order to support the disabled rebuild their livelihoods, countries like Ethiopia, Angola, and Senegal initiated adapted programs offering education, basic business skills training, and career advice. This in addition to efforts by Algeria, Burundi, and Ethiopia to facilitate access of disabled persons to grants and loans to start small businesses and other economic inclusion micro-projects, some of which are specifically targeted towards women with disabilities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This progress would not have been possible without the support of a range of UN agencies, the ICRC, NGOs, and Civil Society Organizations, aided by generous funding from the international
partners, many of them with us here today. I would like to seize the opportunity to extend the AU’s thanks and appreciation for their partnership and commitment.

As we move forward, it is important that we work towards the smooth transition from international support to sustainable and nationally owned and led initiatives. Support from the international partners should therefore be geared towards building national capacities in the development, financing and administration of national mine action strategies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The explosive hazards that pose a danger to civilians living in conflict and post conflict setting is not only defined by landmines but include different types of threats, such as unexploded ordnances, unsecured weapons and ammunition, and Improvised Explosive Devices – or IEDs. This is why this year the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action is being held under the theme “More Than Mines”. This theme is very timely and appropriate, drawing attention to important issues we currently face on the continent.

Over the past three decades, a total of 76 unplanned explosions at munitions sites of varying severity were recorded in twenty-five Member States. We can still vividly recall the devastation caused by the Mpila munitions depot explosion in Brazzaville in 2012 which killed almost 240 people and injured another 2,300; leaving many more without shelter.

We also continue to witness the horrific scenes of death and destruction caused by IEDs employed by terrorist groups. In Mali, those have been responsible for the death of several UN peacekeepers. In Nigeria, Boko Haram has committed some of its most despicable acts by strapping IEDs around children forcing them to become suicide bombers. In Kenya, they are used by Al-Shabaab to kill and terrorize the general population and dissuade the State from extending a helping hand to the rebuilding of the Somali State. In Somalia, IEDs continue to pose a serious threat to the operations of AMISOM and its troops’ mobility while vehicle borne
IEDs are continually used to attack government buildings and officials in Mogadishu resulting in the death of tens of innocent civilians and those who work to bring peace and stability to the country.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The AU has remained cognizant of the threat posed by mines, unexploded ordnances and IEDs. Since 1995, the AU and its predecessor launched a number of initiatives aimed at addressing the scourge of anti-personnel landmines and other explosive remnants of war. These initiatives include the Kempton Park Plan of Action adopted in 1997 by the First Continental Conference of African Experts on Landmines.

At last year’s commemoration of the Mine Action day, the Commission launched the Mine Action and Explosive Remnants of War Strategic Framework Project. The objective of the Strategic Framework is to support AU Member States in reducing the threat posed by conventional weapons, mines, explosive remnants of war, cluster munitions and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in accordance with the relevant international instruments and best practices.

The Strategic Framework promotes the concept of national ownership and recognizes that while substantial regional and international support and assistance is required national governments hold the primary responsibility for developing and implementing mine action and explosive hazard management programs. This Strategic Framework consists of three components:

The first is to advocate for universal participation in the legal regimes against landmines and explosives, raise awareness on explosive threats within Member States and mobilize technical and financial assistance. This also includes advocacy for victims’ assistance and their physical rehabilitation and socio-economic reintegration.
The second component aims to assist Member States conduct explosive threat reduction activities such as demining, physical protection and management of conventional weapons and munitions stockpiles. Here the AU will provide training to practitioners and de-miners as well as facilitate the delivery of demining and counter-IED equipment and expertise.

The third component focuses on delivering technical support to the AU Peace Support Operations to ensure that member states in which missions are deployed as well as the troops deployed are trained and equipped to respond to all types of explosive threats, including IEDs.

The AU has already made significant progress in implementing the project. Activities in this regard include consultative and capacity building workshops on victims’ assistance and clearing mined areas. The AU also supported the training of practitioners from several affected countries in undergoing training on Explosive Ordinance Disposal. Moreover, the AU provided a number of affected states with de-mining equipment to meet their national training needs and mines clearance deadlines.

I wish to seize this opportunity to invite the international organizations and partners to collaborate with, and support, the AU in implementing this strategic framework which reflects our common objective in realizing the vision of a continent free of the threat of landmines and explosive hazards.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Removing a mine or disposing of an IED is an expensive task that carries with it significant dangers. Even with training, mine disposal experts expect that for every 5,000 mines cleared one worker will be killed and two workers will be injured by accidental explosions. I would like to conclude my statement by paying tribute to these brave men and women who continue to
work anonymously and in the most difficult and dangerous conditions to save the lives of countless men, women and children and to clear our path to development.

Thank you very much for your kind attention and for joining us today.