With reference to UNODA’s letter ODA/18-00075/IEDs dated 2nd February 2018 concerning resolution 72/36 entitled “Countering the threat posed by improvised explosive devices”, Austria would like to provide the following brief comments and information:

The protection of civilians in armed conflict and the commitment to upholding international humanitarian law are longstanding Austrian foreign policy priorities. The indiscriminate use and effects of certain conventional weapons and their increasing humanitarian impact on civilian populations are a major concern for Austria’s approach towards these weapons. Improvised explosive devices, as explained in Resolution 72/36, pose a particular threat to the protection of civilian populations in conflict areas. Therefore, a comprehensive approach towards addressing these challenges is required. Endeavours to prohibit or restrain the use of certain conventional weapons contribute to this overarching aim. Austria engages with such an approach in several areas:

One of the deadliest challenges for the protection of civilians in armed conflicts is the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA). Their use constitutes a grave humanitarian problem with a broad range of devastating impacts on civilians in numerous countries worldwide. Civilian harm from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has increased significantly in recent years, with a significant part resulting from the use of improvised explosive devices in urban settings. Due to its aggregate direct and indirect effects, the use of EWIPA has become one of the main causes of forced displacement. There is an immense need to further raise awareness about the immediate, short and longer-term impacts of the use of EWIPA and to enhance the dialogue among States, non-State actors and all other relevant stakeholders on this critical topic.

The aim of Austria’s engagement is to improve protection of civilians through the compliance of conflict parties with international humanitarian law. Austria therefore fully supports the Secretary General’s proposal for a political declaration on the matter. Austria has presented a working paper on this issue to the Meeting of the High Contracting Parties of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons in November 2017 and organized workshops as well as contributed to a regional seminar in Mozambique. Austria firmly believes that more attention needs to be devoted to increase awareness on the humanitarian impact of the use of EWIPA, as well as to identify appropriate measures to reduce and prevent the devastating civilian harm caused by EWIPA. Austria cooperates closely with like-minded countries, as well as representatives from other stakeholders towards that end. Austria therefore regularly raises the use of EWIPA and its consequences on the civilian population in the General Assembly, the Security Council or other multinational institutions or multi-stakeholder events such the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. In addition to these and other suitable fora, Austria considers it appropriate to discuss such challenges in the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

Austria’s longstanding commitment against antipersonnel landmines and cluster munitions deserves mentioning as an important humanitarian contribution, as those weapons continue to pose an acute threat for civilian populations, and claim innumerable lives, even decades after fighting has stopped. Completing clearance by 2025 was a commitment made at the Maputo Review Conference of the Mine Ban Treaty in 2014. Despite successes of mine clearance in the past, the use of improvised anti-personnel mines, which clearly fall within the scope of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, poses an increasing challenge to efforts undertaken under the Convention.
As the ICBL Landmine Monitor 2017 shows the longstanding trend of a reduction of APM victims was unfortunately broken, 2016 being the second year in a row with exceptionally high numbers of people recorded as killed or injured by landmines – including improvised types that act as antipersonnel landmines, cluster munition remnants, and other remnants of war. In 2016 the Monitor recorded 8.605 mine/ERW casualties, of which at least 2.089 people were killed.

Victim-activated IEDs fall under the Ottawa Convention’s definition of landmines and therefore are banned by international law. Austria is in favor of retaining one standard for humanitarian mine clearing, including IED, wherever possible.

Austria has taken up the chairmanship of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction in 2017 and continued its support for the United Nations Mine Action Service in Libya and the United Nations Policy on Victim Assistance in Mine Action. The provisions on victim assistance contained in the Convention have contributed to improving the lives of victims worldwide. Austria recognizes the important contribution of civil society and continues its support for such programs.

The Resolution also refers to the need for effectively securing conventional ammunition stockpiles in order to mitigate the risk of their diversion to illicit use as materials for IEDs. In the context of the, Austria has contributed its expertise on stockpile management to various projects in support of the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons and initiatives by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation Europe.