Briefing to the Meeting of the Security Council on Small Arms and Light Weapons

Remarks by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
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New York,
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Mr. President,
Distinguished members of the Security Council,
Ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset, allow me to express my gratitude to Belgium for convening this very important meeting, and for giving me the opportunity to brief.

I applaud the Security Council’s commitment to address the issue of small arms and light weapons on a regular basis.

This is only the second time that I am personally briefing the Council on this agenda item, but the biennial consideration of “small arms” began twelve years ago with a 2007 presidential statement (S/PRST/2007/24). In that statement, the Security Council articulated the deeply negative consequences of excessive and poorly-controlled small arms and light weapons.

The Council noted with grave concern that the destabilizing accumulation and illicit manufacture, trade and circulation of small arms and light weapons increase the intensity and duration of armed conflicts, undermine the sustainability of peace agreements and frustrate prevention efforts. In sum, the Council recognized that illicit flow and excessive accumulation of such weapons compromise the effectiveness of the Security Council in discharging its primary responsibility to maintain international peace and security.

In view of the gravity of the challenges, the Security Council requested the Secretary-General to begin reporting on small arms on a biennial basis beginning in 2008. Since this request, there have been six reports of the Secretary-General on this topic.

It is important to acknowledge that there are common themes that run throughout all the reports of the Secretary-General on this critical issue, including the most recent one issued in December 2019. Such commonalities are indicative of the depth and scope of the problem of small arms and light weapons.

In this regard, I wish to address two themes of high relevance to the work of the
Security Council—the role of illicit small arms, light weapons and their ammunition in conflict and pervasive crime; and the deeply cross-cutting and wide-ranging impact of illicit small arms and light weapons flows.

These two fundamental themes have been consistently raised throughout the biennial reports of the Secretary-General, as well as in the context of the two thematic resolutions adopted on small arms and light weapons, namely Resolutions 2117 (2013) and 2220 (2015).

Let me highlight a few points, drawing upon the content of the latest report of the Secretary-General from last year.

First, the destabilizing accumulation, illicit transfer and misuse of small arms and light weapons continue to initiate, sustain and exacerbate armed conflict and pervasive crime.

In situations of conflict and post-conflict, the majority of acts of violence are carried out with small arms and light weapons. On a global scale, small arms were used in nearly 50 percent of all violent deaths between 2010 and 2015. This translates to more than 200,000 deaths each year. With an estimated 1 billion small arms in circulation worldwide, the use of these weapons in lethal violence, whether in conflict or non-conflict settings, is prevalent across regions and subregions from the Americas to Africa to Southern Europe. No State is immune from the challenges posed by illicit arms flows.

Small arms and light weapons are the weapons of choice in intra-state conflicts and for terrorism, organized crime and gang warfare. Current and past crises that have been addressed by this Council, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Haiti to Mali, have all been aggravated by the widespread availability and uncontrolled flow of small arms and light weapons and their ammunition.

In 2018 alone, the Security Council raised the challenges posed by small arms, light weapons and ammunition in the framework of United Nations peacekeeping operations and special political missions in Afghanistan, Abyei, the Central African Republic, Haiti, Libya and Somalia. Currently, the mandates of nine peacekeeping operations and special political missions address conventional weapons-related issues—including, inter alia, small arms and
light weapons control and weapons and ammunition management.¹

In this context, I wish to highlight the mandate of the newly-established United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti that provides for advisory capacity on gang violence, community violence reduction and weapons and ammunitions management. This is a welcome development indicative of the importance of proper weapons and ammunitions management in reducing violence.

Diversion remains a major source of weapons and their ammunitions for gangs, criminal organizations and terrorist groups. Illicit small arms, light weapons and their ammunition originate from varied sources—from poorly-managed State-owned stockpiles, battlefield capture or loss following State collapse. There are also ample diversion opportunities along the supply-chain from manufacture through end-use.

We are witnessing the serious impact of such illicit arms flows, including in relation to violent extremism, throughout the Sahel and parts of the Central African subregion. A continued influx of weapons, including by sea, into Libya remains a serious concern. South Sudan is similarly suffering from steady flow of weapons and ammunition, a reality that is affecting the safety of United Nations personnel and hindering the ability of the United Nations Mission to carry out its mandate. In Haiti, where there are over 270,000 illicit firearms in the possession of civilians, violent crime has reached unacceptable heights.

I turn now to the second central theme. **The negative impact of illicit small arms and light weapons flows is cross-cutting and multi-dimensional.** Illicit small arms and light weapons have a multitude of implications for security, human rights, sustainable development, gender equality and conflict prevention. It is in this spirit, that the Secretary-General has consistently encouraged the Security Council to consider small arms and light weapons, including their ammunition, in the context of both country-specific and thematic agenda items.

As echoed by the Security Council in its 2007 presidential statement, the excessive

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¹ Darfur, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Abyei, Yemen, Libya, Haiti, Somalia
accumulation, illicit trade and misuse of small arms and light weapons have wide-ranging consequences touching upon all core pillars of the United Nations work—peace and security; humanitarian actions, human rights; the rule of law; and development.

Small arms continue to facilitate a vast spectrum of acts that constitute human rights violations, including the killing and maiming of children, rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence. Armed violence perpetrated with small arms and light weapons erodes legal and peaceful dispute resolution mechanisms. And contemporary armed conflict is also a primary driver of displacement and food insecurity. In Yemen, as of the end of 2019, an estimated 4 million people are internally displaced amidst devastating conflict facilitated by steady arms flows.

The Secretary-General has recognized the relationship between high levels of armed violence and challenges to achieving sustainable development. With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the international community recognized that sustainable development cannot be realized without peace and security. In tandem, by virtue of adoption of target 16.4 that includes a significant reduction of illicit arms flows, States acknowledged the role of effective small arms control in reducing armed violence and thus enabling communities to better pursue sustainable development.

In his Agenda for Disarmament, the Secretary-General prioritizes “disarmament that saves lives”, including a call for deeper and more coherent efforts on small arms and light weapons at the national level. To this end, the Office for Disarmament Affairs is partnering with the UN Development Programme to support country-level, small-arms control and armed violence reduction initiatives through a holistic approach, including a gender lens. To facilitate this work, the Secretary-General established the “Saving Lives Entity”, so-called “SALIENT” trust facility in his Peacebuilding Fund. The SALIENT fund is intended to serve as an effective tool for the realization of sustainable peace as a basis for longer-term development. Pilot projects will be initiated this calendar year in collaboration with respective UN Country Teams.

I would be remiss not to also underscore the highly-gendered nature of small arms and light weapons. The Security Council has paid increasing attention to the gendered aspects of small arms and light weapons control, including the full and effective participation of women
in all policy and practice, as well as the differentiated impacts of illicit arms on women, men, girls and boys.

The deeply societal characteristics of the small arms and light weapons issue necessitate a comprehensive mainstreaming of gender perspectives in legislative, policy and programmatic frameworks. To date, gender has not been sufficiently integrated into policies regulating small arms and light weapons nor has there been sufficient research and data collection. Without the benefit of evidence-based information on the gendered implications of small arms and light weapons, small arms control interventions will remain gender-blind, thus hampering policy development, reinforcing gender inequalities and impeding the achievements of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

To support enhanced effectiveness of small arms control measures, the Office for Disarmament Affairs is implementing a multi-year project, with the financial support of the European Union, to promote small arms approaches that include systematic gender analysis, the integration of gender perspectives and promote women’s empowerment. The development of a training manual and the conduct of various national and regional capacity-building activities are among the concrete outputs to be delivered over the coming three years.

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Before concluding, I wish to make a few additional remarks on the content of the 2019 report of the Secretary-General on small arms and light weapons as contained in document S/2019/1011.

The Secretary-General provides an overview of significant trends and developments over the last two years. He laments the continued rise in global military expenditure and the role that small arms and light weapons continue to play in hindering peace, security and sustainable development.

At the same time, the Secretary-General recognizes the considerable efforts
undertaken at the global, regional, sub-regional and national levels in support of small arms and light weapons control. Such efforts include work in the framework of the Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons and its International Tracing Instrument, in particular the outcome of the 2018 Third Review Conference, the Firearms Protocol to the Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, and the Arms Trade Treaty.

Equally important, efforts at the regional and subregional levels have continued to reinforce and enhance coordination in the area of small arms and light weapons control. Regional efforts are especially critical with regard to combating cross-border trafficking.

In particular, efforts in Africa, a region severely affected by the small arms scourge, have continued in the framework of the “Silencing the Guns by 2020” initiative. The Security Council, through adoption of resolution 2457 (2019), has importantly outlined means to ensure robust support for this important initiative.

The United Nations is undertaking concrete action to support the African Union in achieving its goal of a conflict-free continent, including by supporting the upcoming September 2020 “Africa Amnesty Month” for the surrender, collection and destruction of illegally-acquired weapons. The Office for Disarmament Affairs and the Department of Peace Operations are also continuing to support more effective weapons and ammunitions management, including in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration contexts. Over the past two years, the United Nations has supported national authorities in weapons and ammunitions management in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mali. Proper management of arms and ammunition is fundamental to the safety and security of communities, especially those impacted by conflict.

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I would like to conclude my briefing by reiterating the need for mainstreaming small arms and light weapons considerations across the work of the Security Council.
A key denominator in all issues of the Security Council, both geographic and thematic, is that the wide and easy availability of small arms, light weapons and associated ammunition are key determinants of crisis dynamics.

Given the wide-ranging impact of these weapons, the second section of the Secretary-General’s 2019 report contains an assessment of several of the Council’s thematic areas of work that have particular relevance to the small arms and light weapons considerations.

The report assesses the relevance of small arms and light weapons considerations to several key thematic items on the Council’s agenda— namely the protection of civilians in armed conflict; peace operations; arms embargoes; women, peace and security; children and armed conflict; counter-terrorism; and transnational organized crime. The assessment offers concrete and conceptual linkages, including practical recommendations on how to integrate small arms and light weapons considerations in these areas of work.

In closing, allow me to reiterate that compartmentalized treatment of the small arms and light weapons issue is not sufficient to address the seriousness and magnitude of the challenges arising from these weapons. If threats to international peace and security are to be adequately addressed, small arms and light weapons must be considered regularly and across issue areas.

It is a matter of urgency for the United Nations, the Security Council and the broader international community to focus on the root causes of illicit arms flows with a view to preventing, mitigating and resolving conflict.

I thank you very much for your attention.