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BRIEFING SESSION ON UNREC AND THREE DECADES OF REGIONAL DISARMAMENT IN AFRICA

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OPENING REMARKS

BY

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Your Excellency, Dr. Abdel-Fatau Musah, Director for Political Affairs and Deputy Head of the UN Office to the AU,
Distinguished representatives of AU Member States and International Partners,
Distinguished Director and staff of UNREC and representatives of the United Nations,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am glad to join you this morning at this briefing session on behalf of the African Union Commission. At the outset, I wish to congratulate the UN Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa – UNREC – on reaching its 30 year milestone. The African Union Commission is a proud partner of UNREC and our collaboration has been growing stronger over the years.

The African Union is particularly committed to the vision and mandate of UNREC. This was evident by the fact that in 1985, the Assembly of the Organization of African Unity called upon the Secretary-General of the United Nations, to establish a regional office in Africa to promote peace, disarmament and development on the continent. Three decades later, I believe the progress that we have jointly made cannot be under-stated. This anniversary is an ideal opportunity to share our achievements and successes in the area of disarmament and to reflect on the challenges that lie ahead.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The challenges that existed thirty years ago not only persist, but have grown in complexity. The proliferation of illicit conventional weapons, particularly small arms,

continues to cause unspeakable death, destruction and suffering. Furthermore, we are faced by changing conflict dynamics and arms trafficking and circulation trends. This is further complicated by the nature and range of actors using such arms, including pirates, terrorists, mercenaries and criminals. On the other hand, legally owned conventional, and in the absence of proper controls, remain at risk of theft, pilferage and diversion to unauthorized users.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Over the years, a range of measures and initiatives were undertaken by Member States with the support of the AU and UNREC. This work has been undertaken within the framework of international and regional legal and political instruments and covers a range of areas, which will be reviewed in more detail in the next session by the Director of UNREC.

As we reflect on these achievements, we also have to consider the challenges that we faced and the opportunities that we should capitalize on. In this regard, I would like to emphasize a few points from the AU's perspective that would be of benefit for our collective efforts.

First is the issue of national ownership and sustainability. The support that has been provided by UNREC, the AU and international partners to member States, has had an important impact on the ground. But, unless there is a strong sense of ownership and leadership on the part of Member States this progress will be reversed.

Sustainability should, therefore, be integral into project design and implementation. This will require that we work closely with the national authorities to ensure that the support provided address their concerns and priorities; that they take a lead role in implementation; and that they equally commit the human and financial resources required to ensure that the positive impact is sustained even after the assistance programmes end.

Second is the issue of integrating arms control and disarmament into wider conflict prevention and management initiatives. Unfortunately, most of the work that has been done took place in post-conflict settings, where conventional weapons have already contributed to the intensification of armed conflict and caused substantial damage to human lives, the economy and regional peace and stability. We should therefore, follow an approach that aims to secure government-held weapons and stem the flow of illicit weapons into unstable regions and states where there is a potential for the outbreak of armed conflict.

This requires that all Member States work collaboratively and transparently to prevent their territories and borders from being used for arms trafficking. Such measures should be taken within the framework of the relevant decision of the UN Security Council, the AU Peace and Security Council and the Arms Trade Treaty. At this point, I wish to refer to the press statement issued following the open session of the AU Peace and Security Council on *Silencing the Guns*, held in April 2014. The statement called for practical measures to effectively address the illicit proliferation of arms and for universal signature and ratification of the Arms Trade Treaty. The press statement further called for the naming and shaming of suppliers, financiers, facilitators, transit points and recipients of illicit weapons.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This brings me to the third critical issue that requires renewed focus, which is addressing the social, economic and political factors that motivates groups and communities to acquire arms. Indeed, any successful community disarmament efforts have to address their security and developmental needs, build trust between communities and government, and provide communities with the alternatives to crime and other illicit activities.

Lastly, the importance of information, knowledge and data cannot be overemphasized. As I have mentioned earlier, the typology of conflict and actors have evolved over the years. This has been matched by new trends in arms trafficking and circulation and the emergence of new sources of weaponry and suppliers. For our work to be effective it should be based on, and guided by, evidence and research.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In concluding, those were a few perspectives from our end, but which I believe affects the work of all of us. I hope that this session further discusses the various challenges and opportunities while also celebrating the important work that has been accomplished by UNREC over the years.

Thank you for your kind attention.