Statement by the Holy See at the Fourth United Nations Conference to Review Progress Made in the Implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects

New York, 18—28 June 2024

Madam Chair,

At the opening of the Fourth Review Conference (RevCon4) of the United Nations Programme of Action (PoA) on Small Arms and Light Weapons and the International Tracing Instrument (ITI), the Holy See would like to extend its gratitude and support for your leadership in the negotiation process. It is our hope that we will be able to achieve consensus and collaborate in seeking to advance disarmament and the realization of just peace.

Indeed, as the world experiences “a third world war fought piecemeal,”¹ the illicit proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons represent one of today’s most pressing security threats at a national, regional and global level. Each year, tens of thousands of people are killed or wounded in conflicts that are fought primarily with these “weapons of mass destruction in slow motion” and in crime-ridden areas outside of conflict zones, often at the hands of armed groups and terrorists.² The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has devastating consequences for individuals and communities, contributing to instability and hindering their development. Any effort to control the spread of these weapons is therefore crucial to promote peace and protect all civilians.

For this reason, my delegation would like to reiterate its support for the implementation of the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects, as well as for other instruments, such as the Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas and the Silencing the Gun Initiative. Such instruments are important tools that help at the national,

¹ Pope Francis, Homily at Redipuglia War Memorial, 13 September 2014.
regional, and global levels to counter dangerous trends, such as the proliferation, illicit trade and misuse of small arms and light weapons.

Despite these laudable efforts, the Holy See views with extreme concern the continued rise in global military spending. The volume of transfers of major conventional weapons has significantly increased worldwide, and global military expenditures have reached a new record high of $2.24 trillion in 2022.3 “Sadly, today, investments in arms manufacturing are those which yield the most income.”4 Since this alarming trend also includes small arms and light weapons, allow me, Madam Chair, to recall Pope Francis’ words: “Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society? Sadly, the answer, as we all know, is simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood.”5 However, the production and distribution of small arms and light weapons must not be regarded in merely economic terms; it is also a question of profound ethical and humanitarian concerns that demand our urgent attention and action.

Madam Chair,

My delegation has actively engaged in the negotiations of RevCon4, prioritizing the protection of human life and the safeguarding of human dignity, especially for those in the most vulnerable situations. In this regard, I would like to highlight two matters that are particularly significant for my delegation:

First, children continue to be disproportionately affected by armed conflict. Small arms and light weapons are commonly used to commit serious violations against children, including recruitment, abduction, and violence, also in the context of attacks on schools and hospitals. As a result, my delegation believes that the RevCon text should include stronger provisions on child protection.

Second, in combating the effects of the illicit trade of such weapons, the Holy See wishes to reiterate the importance of considering an approach that can effectively address the real needs of women and children who fall victim to such violence. We believe that this can be achieved by avoiding any misunderstandings of terminology that could jeopardize the actual protection of such victims.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

3 Ibidem.
4 Pope Francis, General Audience, 1 May 2024.
5 Pope Francis, Address to the Joint Session of the United States Congress, 24 September 2015.