Open Ended Meeting of Governmental Experts on the International Tracing Instrument  
9-13 May 2011.

Belgian Statement on tracing – final 

Mr. Chairman,

Let me begin by confirming that in the Belgian experience the UN Programme of Action, the connected reporting and the preparation of and participation in the international PoA related meetings prove very helpful in stimulating cooperation between the different national agencies and other stakeholders involved. I’m pleased to inform you that Belgium is taking up its responsibility with regard to the marking, registering and tracing of SALW, consistent with our commitments under the International Tracing Instrument and the UN Fire arms protocol. An interagency working group is meeting several times a year to coordinate the compilation of reports and participation in international meetings like this one.

Last week Belgium submitted its first national report on the implementation of the ITI, including the designation of a national point of contact on the ITI. I saw this report is already published on the site of the ISS, thanks for that.

With regard to tracing, the national report mentions two tracing practises that were performed by Belgium in 2010. The first kind of tracing is carried out by the police in the context of bilateral, regional or international police cooperation. The second one is tracing at the request of UN expert panels that report to UN Sanction Committees. This tracing is channeled through the Arms Control department of Foreign Affairs, where I work in.

I will go deeper into these tracing practises:

First, tracing by the police is performed by the Illicit Arms service of the federal judicial police in the frameworks of bilateral, regional and international established police cooperation. Foreign tracing requests can come directly from police services in other countries, or via facilitation of EUROPOL or INTERPOL. Within the EU a group of European Firearm experts has been created, bringing together police services from EU member states involved in combating illicit arms, including tracing. In March 2010 The Belgian federal police signed a MoU with the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) with regard to the access and use of eTrace, the ATF’s electronic firearms tracing system that facilitates firearms tracing and assists efforts to combat trafficking.

In 2010 the police processed 610 tracing requests coming from abroad, of these: 104 requests involved weapons manufactured in Belgium, 506 involved weapons not manufactured in Belgium, but transmitted via Belgium. To carry out the tracing the police makes use of the police’s database, the registers of arms dealers, manufacturers and collectors and/or the Central Arms Register – a central national database for all fire-arms present in Belgium with the exception of the weapons of the armed forces, that keep their own registers. This central register is currently in development. To give an example, if the weapon appears to have been produced in Belgium by FN Herstal / Browning (the only fire arms manufacturer Belgium), the police will contact the manufacturer who holds records of its manufactured weapons. Based on his registers the manufacturer will be able to indicate when the weapon was produced and to whom it was sold.
Then we come to the second kind: tracing in response to requests from Groups of Experts on the sanctions of the Security Council of the UN.

In the context of its cooperation with UN expert panels, in 2010 Belgium has responded to two tracing requests from the Group of Experts on the Sudan established pursuant to UNSC resolution 1591. Via the Permanent Representation of Belgium here in New York these tracing requests reached our department in Brussels. Verification with the assistance of the manufacturer confirmed that weapons were being produced in Belgium in 1971 and 1975, and then sold to third countries in the region. This is a good illustration of one of the characteristics of the SALW issue: SALW can be operational for decades. Let me also use this opportunity to underscore the importance of cooperation on tracing with the UN expert panels.

I want to elaborate on the cooperation with the manufacturer on tracing: The records of FN Herstal / Browning contain, for each manufactured individual weapon, the serial number, model, caliber, date of manufacture and sale, and the name of the first purchaser, in this since 1889. The record keeping was performed in an analogue manner up to 1983. From 1983 on record-keeping has been gradually digitalized to be 100% digital by the end of the eighties. FN Herstal states that 100% of correct tracing requests on weapons produced in the last 25 years can be resolved. For the weapons older than 25 years, this percentage decreases to 95%. Tracing failures by the manufacturer are in most cases caused by an incomplete or incorrect registration of the markings on the weapon. In other words, most tracing failures don’t originate in the marking or record keeping, but from the inaccurate identification of the markings. And this echoes the findings of Interpol and ATF mentioned during the very useful side-event yesterday on “why fire arms traces fail”. During a side event, this lunch time, organized by the Geneva Forum in CR1 a representative from FN-Herstal will give a presentation with references to cooperation in tracing.

So, these are the tow tracing practices that Belgium’s involved in. We’re very much interested to find out about other tracing practices. For example: we’re very interested to find out more about the role and actions by National Points of Contact in other states.

In the introductory statement by UNODC, Mrs. Grassi explained that tracing in the context of the UN Fire Arms Protocol happens out of a criminal justice perspective. Tracing in the context of the ITI has a comparable but not identical perspective, its perspective in the fight against the uncontrolled and illicit proliferation of SALW. In this regard Belgium would also be interested to find out more about ways to improve the link between on the one hand tracing results and on the other hand arms export licensing. How could information on diverted and traced arms be better used by arms export licensing authorities in order to prevent future diversion. Tracing information can indeed reveal that certain buyers (states or private actors) involve an increased risk on diversion, and therefore deserve special attention in case of new transfer license requests. Most arms export legislations, like the national Belgian legislation and the EU Common Position contain an anti-diversion criterion. The evaluation of this criterion is an operational part of the decision making process with regard to export licensing. The risk assessment is obviously a challenging task. It is in this context that the question could be a asked how to compile and customise tracing information in a format that can be properly used by arms export licensing officers to assess the risk of diversion. Aware that this issue falls a bit out of the scope of this session, I will stop here. But still Belgium is very interested in hearing ideas and perspectives in this regard from other states.