

Opening Speech by Minister of State Gernot Erler

Excellencies

State Secretary Eide,

Hans Raidel, my colleague from the German Bundestag,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you all here today in Berlin as representatives of the signatories of the Convention on Cluster Munitions. I am delighted to see you consider this issue so important that you have accepted the invitation of our Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, to this Conference on the Destruction of Stockpiled Cluster Munitions.

I would like to say a special welcome to Norway's State Secretary of Defence, Espen Barth Eide. He represents the country that is not only our partner in organizing this conference, but above all the initiator of the Oslo Process. This was an ambitious and challenging agenda which culminated in December 2008 in the signing of the Convention on Cluster Munitions.

I am also particularly pleased to welcome my fellow parliamentarian, Mr Hans Raidel. His presence testifies to the crucial support the German Bundestag has given to the campaign for the Convention here in Germany and also highlights the important role parliaments have played all over the world in persuading their governments to unconditionally renounce cluster munitions.

Other key actors to whom I pay tribute here are the United Nations and its relevant organizations as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as the guardian of International Humanitarian Law. I would also like to extend a warm welcome to the delegates of the Cluster Munitions Coalition (CMC) and the representatives of our German NGOs. The success of the campaign for the Convention owes a great deal to their unshakable and active commitment. The media, too, have played an important role in the Oslo Process. Their reports, for example on the Middle East conflict in 2006, proved a turning point in the debate on cluster munitions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Some 87 signatory states are represented here today, including nearly all those with cluster munitions stockpiles. Together with the delegates from UN organizations and the ICRC as well as civil society and company representatives, over 270 participants have responded to our call to pave the way for the speedy and complete destruction of cluster munitions stockpiles.

Germany regards disarmament and arms control as very important issues. In our view this includes of course not only weapons of mass destruction (WMD), but also conventional weapons that cause disproportionate harm or have indiscriminate effects on the civilian population. This applies in particular to cluster munitions.

On nuclear disarmament we are now seeing fresh momentum and commend our American partners for their new approach. Let us all hope and do our best to ensure that this momentum also extends to conventional disarmament.

Cluster munitions are amongst the most problematic and vicious types of ammunition used in contemporary warfare, due to their large number of submunitions and high failure-rate. They are imprecise weapons designed to strike a greater surface than many other conventional weapons by dispersing smaller but highly lethal bomblets. Scattered on the surface, they are extremely dangerous and put the civilian population at great risk. Their long-term impact is disastrous. It is estimated that 98% of their victims are civilians, who in most cases are killed or injured long after hostilities have ended, when they are back home and trying to carry on with their normal lives. So clearly in contaminated areas there can be no such thing as sustainable post-conflict development. The problems caused by cluster munitions were highlighted by the conflict that broke out in the Middle East in summer 2006. According to reports from Lebanon, the failure-rate of cluster munitions deployed there was over 15%, leaving vast areas of land contaminated for years or decades after the fighting had ended.

From 2006 up to the end of 2008 we all witnessed a fundamental shift in the views of many governments concerning the military necessity and reliability of cluster munitions. This development was clearly reflected in the "Banning Cluster Munitions Monitor Report" [1], released last month. In a whole series of conferences and international negotiating rounds states pushed for and finally gained a strong treaty banning cluster munitions.

In 2007 my Government made a first contribution to the international process aimed at abolishing these weapons by helping to fund the report compiled by Handicap International entitled "Circle of Impact: The Fatal Footprint of Cluster Munitions on People and Communities" [2]. Prior to that, data on the use and impact of cluster munitions were practically non-existent. By highlighting the humanitarian problems caused by the use of cluster bombs, this report has been instrumental in convincing many members of the international community to join the movement to ban cluster munitions.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today I am delighted to announce that Germany has now completed its ratification process. Within the next few days the instrument of ratification will be transmitted to the depositary of the Convention, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, thus making Germany one of the first 15 countries to ratify the Convention. That this process has been completed so quickly and smoothly is also due to the active backing of the Bundestag, which gave us wholehearted support throughout the campaign for a ban on cluster munitions. So I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation and thanks for this important contribution. For the Convention to enter into force, thirty ratifications are required and we very much hope this number will be reached shortly. Of course we also encourage all countries that are not yet parties to sign up very soon. The more countries become parties to the Convention, the less cluster munitions will pose a threat to civilian populations.

As we all know, the Convention contains not only a passive provision to refrain from the use of cluster munitions. In Article 3 it also commits States Parties, in a timeframe of eight years from the Convention's entry into force for the respective State Party, to "destroy or ensure destruction of all cluster munitions". Past experience has shown that the timely implementation of such provisions is of the utmost importance and is not always an easy task. Technically, moreover, the destruction of cluster munitions is a much more complex affair than the destruction of mines. Given the complexity of the procedures involved and the length of time required, a late start on this could be a factor of instability for the whole instrument and compromise the Convention's goals and objectives. That is why our ambition should be to destroy the stockpiled cluster munitions as fast as possible, since this is, after all, one of the principal obligations on States Parties to the Convention. My Government regards this as so important that we offered to organize this conference even before the Convention enters into force. This initiative sets a real precedent in terms of international practice, but in this case I feel it is absolutely justified and I am glad you have responded to our invitation in such numbers.

As long as the Convention on Cluster Munitions has yet to achieve truly universal status, our objective must be to prevent the proliferation of these weapons. Germany regards this as a very important priority. Destroying cluster munitions stockpiles is not for us a goal in itself but a means to send a strong message about this type of weapon and prevent their further spread and future use.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Since we began destroying our cluster munitions stockpiles back in 2001, we have gained a good deal of experience in this field. Like Norway, the German Government has, at the request of the Bundestag, now adopted a detailed national destruction plan complete with deadlines, numbers and budgets. It will be presented at this afternoon's session.

It was with the idea of sharing our experience with others that we decided to host this conference and invite not only signatories of the Convention and international and non-

governmental organizations to participate, but also and most importantly, representatives of companies actually engaged in the destruction of cluster munitions. These companies will be able to provide us with important insights from both the financial and technical perspective.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The threat cluster munitions pose to civilian populations can be eliminated only if the ban on these munitions is comprehensive. I can assure you of Germany's continued support for all efforts to make the Convention on Cluster Munitions truly universal. Whenever appropriate, we will take the opportunity to speak out in favour of this Convention and call in particular on the governments of states which have not yet done so to become signatories.

In this context, let me warmly welcome the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR). We greatly appreciate the offer of the Lao PDR to host the first Conference of States Parties to the Convention on Cluster Munitions, hopefully already next year. At tomorrow's session Minister Sangsomsak will give us a short preview of the steps to be taken in preparation for such a first Conference of States Parties. Like Norway and a number of other countries as well as the Cluster Munitions Coalition, Germany stands ready to support the Lao PDR in this endeavour.

In addition, Germany will make available two million euro this year specifically for the removal of cluster munitions in various countries and for victim assistance programmes.

To wind up these introductory remarks, let me now wish us all a productive and successful conference. I hope we will take home with us a host of valuable insights and information about this very complex task. And of course I hope, too, that you all enjoy your stay in Berlin and the conference lives up to your expectations.