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PERMANENT MISSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA TO THE OSCE

STATEMENT

**as delivered by the Delegation of the Republic of Armenia at the 1024th
Plenary Meeting of the Forum for Security Co-operation
Security Dialogue on Explosive hazards in the OSCE region:
The Iron harvest**

5 October 2022

Mr. Chairman,

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to begin by thanking all speakers today for their comprehensive briefings and valuable contributions.

As you know, Armenia is situated in a region where unresolved conflicts and persistent outbreaks of violence still pose a real and serious threat to regional peace, stability and security, which, among other things, negatively affect the daily lives of ordinary people. Landmines and unexploded ordnance across the region, including in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone, continue to be a serious obstacle to the development of the affected areas. Therefore, the issue of Explosive Remnants of War has always been a priority for the Armenian government and an area of cooperation with our international partners, including the UN and the OSCE. We supported all international arms control mechanisms and frameworks in this regard and even welcomed the idea of joining the Ottawa Convention simultaneously with the other party to the conflict, which could be an additional confidence-building measure in the region.

Back in 2002, the Armenian government established a Center for Humanitarian Demining and Expertise. Mine action activities in Armenia have been aimed at reducing the threat of mines and explosive ordnance, as well as their negative impact on social, economic and environmental aspects of life. The Center continues its mission of clearing the territory of the country and agricultural lands from mines/explosive ordnance making it safe for cultivation, grazing and other purposes. In parallel with demining activities, the Center puts particular emphasis on raising public awareness through mine/EO risk education and promoting safer behavior. Over the past three years, thousands of hectares of land have been cleared of mines, and a series of awareness-raising and educational activities have been organized for about 20.000 citizens and schoolchildren.

We recall that in the past, the OSCE, as an organization responsible for promoting security and cooperation, including through protection of human rights, contributed to humanitarian demining activities in Armenia through its Office in Yerevan. However, for almost thirty years, Azerbaijan has consistently obstructed any humanitarian demining activity in Nagorno-Karabakh, labeling it as illegal. It went even further by blocking the renewal of the mandate of the OSCE Office in Yerevan on the basis of unfounded allegations of the latter's involvement in demining activities in Nagorno-Karabakh. The fact that landmines and other explosive ordnance posed a serious and indiscriminate threat to the life, security and livelihood of the people of Artsakh was not considered as a humanitarian issue either by Azerbaijan or the OSCE. In this regard, we would like to reiterate that human rights are universal: they cannot be compromised for political reasons or be applied selectively.

It should also be noted that the territories of Nagorno-Karabakh have been heavily contaminated by Azerbaijan with mines and other explosives since the First Nagorno-Karabakh War. Moreover, throughout the subsequent years, Azerbaijan has continued mine-laying activities as an "integral part of its defense strategy". This has been acknowledged by Azerbaijan itself in its official communications, including its 2020 response to the OSCE Questionnaire on Anti-Personnel Landmines (FSC.EMI/255/20).

Azerbaijan's efforts to reduce the OSCE presence in the region, the rejection of confidence- and security-building measures, the uncontrolled accumulation of weapons and ammunition, including mines and other explosives, are very indicative in this respect. Therefore, Azerbaijan bears full responsibility for the current situation in the region, including with regard to mine contamination.

Now, let me also touch upon some issues consistently raised by Azerbaijan during the FSC and other OSCE meetings.

On the issue of minefield maps

After the end of hostilities in November 2020, Armenia, as a humanitarian gesture, provided Azerbaijan with all minefield maps in its possession. Unfortunately, Azerbaijan did not reciprocate our efforts to bring stability in our region. Apparently, the Azerbaijani authorities looked at it differently, rather as a bargaining for the exchange of maps for prisoners of war, an approach worthy of condemnation. We reiterate that the prolonged detention of Armenian POWs and civilian hostages, captured both during the hostilities and after the establishment of the ceasefire, is a gross violation of the norms of humanitarian law, particularly the Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War, which explicitly states that prisoners of war should be immediately released and repatriated.

On the allegations of planting mines

Recently, Azerbaijan began accusing Armenia of planting new mines, including of Armenian production, in the territories that came under its control. First of all, I would like to note that this is nonsense, both from a political and military point of view. Secondly, at present only a dozen countries in the world produce landmines, and Armenia is definitely not among them. Moreover, we have information that Azerbaijan itself is mining

the areas that came under its control as a result of aggression and incursion into the territory of Armenia, and is trying to mislead the international community with false accusations against Armenia.

On the presence of the Armenian armed force in Nagorno-Karabakh

As my delegation has repeatedly noted, including most recently at the special meeting of the Permanent Council, convened at the request of the Armenian delegation, there are no Armenian armed forces in Artsakh. As for the Artsakh Defence Army, there is no provision in any agreed document, including the trilateral ceasefire statement, requiring the dismantling of the Defence Army. Such allegations pursue only one goal - to deprive the Armenians of Artsakh of their right to protection and self-defence and to complete the ethnic cleansing of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

On the OSCE assistance mechanism

Allow me also to add a few words about the OSCE assistance mechanism and Azerbaijan's request for practical assistance in the field of explosive hazards risk reduction. First of all, I would like to note that in Azerbaijan there are no reliable sources of information, no free media, no access to affected territories, except for the one provided by the government. For many years, Azerbaijan has consistently obstructed cooperation between Armenia and the OSCE, including in the field of SALW and SCA, and has single-handedly blocked activities and projects with unfounded claims about their conflict-related nature. Back in 2015, the Republic of Armenia, in accordance with the OSCE Document on SCA, submitted a request to the OSCE for assistance in implementing a project in the field of SALW/SCA, with a view to improving the safety standards of two SALW/SCA storage sites in the Republic of Armenia, in line with OSCE best practices. However, the process was suspended due to the politicized and non-constructive position of the Azerbaijani delegation, which stated repeatedly that Azerbaijan was not in a position to support any assistance project requested by Armenia (FSC.DEL/171/20). The unwillingness and failure of the Organization and its participating States to condemn such practices and denounce such irresponsible behavior have already undermined the effectiveness of the OSCE in this field.

At the same time, what we are witnessing today is an attempt by Azerbaijan to abuse the OSCE assistance mechanism for political manipulation and sharing with the OSCE the burden of the consequences of its own aggressive actions and refusal to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict peacefully. We reiterate that any conflict-related activity by the OSCE can be carried out only on an equal basis, with the involvement of all parties to the conflict, including Artsakh.

Dear Colleagues,

Unfortunately, we will continue to be haunted by "The Iron Harvest", as long as we are unable to establish lasting peace and security in the OSCE region.

Thank you.