Keynote Speech Ambassador Rolf Nikel:

Smart Technology in the control of Small Arms and Light Weapons

at the Conference on Smart Technology in the Federal Foreign Office, 17-18 June 2013

Professor Schetter,
Honourable Mr. Winbäck,
Colleagues,
Herr Minister Schönbohm,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to open this conference. We consider it an important event.

Please let me thank the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), for organizing the conference together with us. BICC is a long standing partner of the German Foreign Office when it comes to conventional arms control. In preparing this conference, they have done a great job again. A particular warm welcome to Professor Conrad Schetter, the new director of BICC, who is going to take the floor after me.

I would like to thank you all for coming, in particular the panelists. Some of you came a long way to attend this event. Please let me welcome in particular Honourable Mr. Christer Winbäck from the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons, who came from Stockholm. I am happy that his network of parliamentarians is involved.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We all know that small arms and light weapons are the most deadly instruments worldwide. More than half a million people fall victim to armed violence every year. This is equivalent to the number of victims of the atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki taken together – every single year. And this figure represents only the tip of the iceberg. Many more non-fatal injuries cause mountains of human suffering and long-term costs to victims, their relatives and to society.

The roots of armed conflict are manifold. Three quarters of the victims die in non-conflict settings – in criminal contexts, in household violence, in gang shootings. There is no simple recipe against armed violence. That is why the UN Programme of Action to combat illicit small arms and light weapons promotes a comprehensive approach. It includes measures to improve stockpile management of arms and ammunition, regulations for marking, registering and tracing weapons as well as recommendations for legal frameworks. It does not, however, address the technology of weapons. More generally, this issue is curiously absent from the international debate to control arms and combat armed violence. The more you think about it, the more surprising it seems.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Safety devices are ubiquitous today. They are particularly present in all things that might pose a danger to us or to people around us. Cars are getting more and more sophisticated in this respect nowadays. Aircraft
since long rely on electronic systems to make flights safe. Power stations, production technology, traffic control, environmental protection – almost every aspect of modern life relies heavily on electronic controlling devices.

Fire weapons are the odd exception. While airbags became compulsory on cars twenty years ago in Europe, we never even discussed the possibility to add safety devices to guns in order to avoid accidents or block their misuse. Is this because guns are less dangerous than cars? I don’t believe so.

Maybe it’s due to a lack of available technology. We have invited representatives from various parts of the industry involved who will be able to answer this question. Are there principal obstacles to adding electronic sensors and controlling devices to a weapon? Some of them could be very simple: A shot counter, for example. Or a shot counter recording the date and time of each shot. Or a camera that takes a picture of each shot. Just imagine what would be possible if such data existed – in monitoring misuse or in forensic analysis, for example. Even more effective would be systems that could not only record data but control the functioning of the weapon itself. In the latest James Bond movie “Skyfall”, Bond loses his hand gun to the villain. The villain, however, cannot use the gun against Bond, as it is equipped with a biometric recognition system. How far does this movie scene reflect technical possibilities of today?

Now try to imagine all the contexts in which the restriction of a weapon’s use to the legitimate owner would save lives: Stolen weapons would be useless. Weapons lost in a military conflict could not be used by the
opponent. Weapons diverted because of corruption would fail to function. The mentally deranged could not use his mother’s or his father’s weapons to shoot children in a nearby school.

Linking sensors with blocking devices may not be the end of the story. More intelligent and complex technology could be imagined. Weapons could be equipped with a friend / foe recognition system. They could be controlled via GPS signals or radio frequencies. They could be localized, blocked, and even destroyed via remote control if need be. The functioning of a weapon could be restricted to a certain geographic area, to certain time frames or both.

These are all mere ideas. The real potential of electronics regarding safety and security of firearms, however, will only unfold if a market for such devices develops. We know from experience: markets are by far the most propitious environment for technological innovation. So we might study how markets developed for comparable safety systems in other contexts. How come that airbags are ubiquitous today? Or anti-lock braking systems? What would the role of the private sector, of consumers and of the public regulator be to set into motion a similar development regarding firearms?

The debate about more safety regarding firearms is fuelled by tragic events like the shoot-out of Newtown, Connecticut. However, it is our objective not to focus on the safety aspect alone, although we recognize the importance of this perspective. We would like to ask which contribution to security of fire weapons technology could make in a broader sense, including the fight against diversion, including the improvement of tracing or allowing for the monitoring of export controls. We would like to shed light on the issue from a technological point of
view and a legal perspective. We would like to consider various social environments.

We want to pay particular attention to arms control in areas where the proliferation of fire arms represents a big challenge. In post-conflict areas, for example. In regions with a particular problem with organized crime or gang violence. We have invited representatives from many parts of the world, including Libya, Sudan, Afghanistan and Côte d'Ivoire. We hope that a frank exchange of views will allow for a clearer understanding about the state of play. We want to explore which technologies could make what contributions to more safety and security in specific and well defined circumstances.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Safety technology is not necessarily limited to individual weapons alone. A centralized control of weapons can be of special importance when it comes to particularly dangerous weapons. An example would be MANPADS. We must avoid that they fall into terrorist hands. If ever a state transferred weapons to a receiver where the end use is not totally water proof, an additional layer of control would be pertinent. The same would hold if an even minimal risk subsisted that non-compliance with end use specifications could entail grave humanitarian consequences or security concerns. In these cases, intelligent devices could have a role to play.

The German government sees great risks in delivering arms into conflict situations, in Syria and elsewhere. Should such a step be taken by any party, however, electronic devices may help ensuring that arms are used
according to the intentions of the provider. Even after delivery, such weapons could be kept from falling into the wrong hands.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very glad that the United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs has contributed its ideas to this conference and is present today. Indeed, the Second Review Conference of the UN Programme of Action to combat illicit small arms and light weapons has tasked the Secretary General of the United Nations to follow up on technical developments regarding the tracing of illicit weapons. The UN has decided to join forces with us in order to use this conference as an input for its assignment.

At this stage, the conference is meant to be a brainstorming event. We want to get a sense of where we stand and what might be the way forward in using technology to make the use of weapons safer and increase security. The results of the conference will be wrapped up, distributed and followed up. We hope that a possible follow-up of this conference might later take a more specific approach, building on the results of our event today and tomorrow.

When arms control and technology come together for the benefit of prevention, this is a great opportunity. When arms control and the private sector join forces, we will see results.

Please let me thank you all again for coming to this event. I wish you two days of very fruitful discussions. I have the pleasure to hand over to Professor Schetter who is going to explain in detail the panels and their specific objectives today and tomorrow.