

Statement

by
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United Nations Disarmament Commission

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates, I begin by congratulating you and your bureau and by pledging the full co-operation and substantive support of the Department of Disarmament Affairs for your efforts throughout the deliberations ahead. I thank Mr. Odei Osei of Ghana and Ms. Gabriela Martinic of Argentina for their good work in chairing the working groups. I appreciate the readiness of Mr. Alaa Issa of Egypt and Mr. Santiago Mourão of Brazil for assuming their responsibilities as the new Chairmen of the working groups at short notice.

Over the last five years that I have served as Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, I have been impressed with the Commission's commitment to its basic purposes and principles, as well as its demonstrated capacity to adapt its practices to meet new demands from the ever-changing international environment. It has, for example, agreed to limit the number of items on its agenda in order to permit more in-depth deliberations. The Commission has also had some very productive sessions, in particular 1999, when it was able to reach a consensus

on guidelines for establishing nuclear-weapon-free zones and for conventional arms control.

The Commission performs an indispensable role in the evolution of global disarmament norms. Its focused substantive agenda allows it to concentrate its deliberations far more than is possible in the First Committee, which has additional responsibilities that include the consideration of over 50 disarmament-related resolutions each year. If the United Nations is -- as described in the Millennium Declaration -- "the indispensable common house of the entire human family," the Disarmament Commission is the wing of that house where new disarmament norms are discussed and elaborated.

Leaving the task of crafting resolutions and negotiating treaties to other parts of the UN disarmament machinery, the Commission makes its greatest contributions in the realm of ideas -- it serves as a seedbed from which global disarmament norms may ultimately emerge. Being strictly a deliberative forum, it often encounters disagreements amongst its members over policies and priorities. Yet through this deliberative process, areas of common ground do indeed emerge, as they did on several occasions in the Commission's work throughout the decade of the 1990's.

It is undeniable, however, that the Commission -- in common with other parts of the multilateral disarmament machinery -- has faced some difficult times in recent years. Its inability to schedule a substantive session in 2002 -- the year of its 50th anniversary -- was especially regrettable. I hope the Commission never again has to cancel a substantive session. Today, disagreements over the role of force in international relations, the contributions of multilateralism to international peace and security, and indeed the relevance and role of the United Nations in serving a full gamut of global norms, are presenting new challenges for the consensus-building process in the Commission. These hardships are coinciding with the recent trend of rising global military expenditures, which this year will likely exceed \$1 trillion -- an unconscionable statistic reminiscent of spending levels during the Cold War.

Yet when times are difficult, the deliberative function of the Commission is all the more important to sustain. This is particularly true with respect to the two issues now on its agenda relating to nuclear disarmament and confidence-building in the area of conventional arms. This year -- which marks the 25th anniversary of that grand consensus in multilateral disarmament at the General Assembly's first Special Session on Disarmament -- the Commission has a unique opportunity to demonstrate its capacity to rise to new challenges, overcome obstacles, and reach common understandings on matters of great importance to all member states.

Nuclear Disarmament

The first item on its agenda concerns "ways and means to achieve nuclear disarmament." The difficulty of this challenge is best symbolized by the grim fact that this issue has now been on the UN agenda for 57 years -- starting with the General Assembly's first resolution in 1946. There has, of course, been some recent progress in related areas. Perhaps the most significant

developments include the bilateral Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, which will -- when it enters into force -- reduce substantially the numbers of strategic nuclear weapons deployed by the United States and the Russian Federation. Another development is the recent commitment of some \$20 billion through the G8 Global Partnership to efforts "against the spread of weapons and materials of mass destruction." Several additional achievements are exhaustively documented in the working paper of the chairman of Working Group I.¹

Yet the actual record in achieving the verified dismantlement and destruction of nuclear weapons inspires little confidence, despite the "unequivocal undertaking" by the nuclear-weapon states at the 2000 NPT Review Conference "to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament." Tens of thousands of these weapons reportedly remain, though exactly how many is still unconfirmed given the lack of transparency over these various weapons programmes. The possible development of new weapons and new targeting options to serve aggressive counter-proliferation purposes further undermines this solemn disarmament undertaking, while creating new incentives for clandestine programmes.

This creeping retreat from nuclear disarmament has also been accompanied by recent challenges to global non-proliferation norms, including -- but not limited to -- the decision by the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea to leave the NPT, and the South Asian nuclear tests in 1998. It is also troubling that proliferation has in some cases been accompanied by the spread of various deterrence doctrines to govern the use of such weapons.

Virtually all members agree that verification and compliance are critical to the success of both disarmament and non-proliferation commitments, as is the non-discriminatory enforcement of the relevant norms. Such functions are vital in the evolution of a genuine rule of law to serve international peace and security. Yet how is the world to reach agreement on the ways and means to achieve global nuclear disarmament -- including its modalities for verification and enforcement -- if not through a careful deliberative process? The review process of the NPT is surely one important arena for assessing progress in implementing the global nuclear disarmament norm, but the Disarmament Commission has the advantage of being a fully universal deliberative body, which enables it to complement the goals of the NPT review process. Working in tandem, these two arenas offer great potential to move the global nuclear disarmament agenda forward, at a time when such progress is long overdue.

Conventional Arms

With respect to conventional arms, every member of this Commission has heard the dictum that arms do not cause wars and that people cause wars. To the extent that arms are inanimate objects that have no will of their own, there is undeniably some logic in such an assertion. Yet how these weapons are developed, tested, traded, and finally used to cause death and suffering -- can indeed have some profound effects on international peace and security. The specific characteristics of weapons -- such as their lethality, mobility, weight, range, stealthiness, and other such properties -- reveal a lot about the capabilities of the state possessing such arms,

and, to some extent, its intentions as well. Similarly, the sheer volume of weapons, if demonstrably in excess of legitimate security needs, can also serve to breed mistrust in international relations -- at worst, it can lead to conditions triggering preemptive wars. In such an environment, even routine military exercises might be confused as preparations for war.

The problem is further complicated in the conventional arms field because it is legitimate for states to possess such weaponry for their self-defence purposes, and because commercial and political motivations frequently underlie their continued production, perfection, and export. In the Persian Gulf, even the current war in Iraq did not deter the convening last month of a major defence trade exhibition in the region. One official commented after the event, "War might delay a few deals for weeks and maybe months, but will not really affect the sales." Indeed the war might serve as a macabre advertisement of new types of weapons. So the great challenge before this Commission is to find a way to reduce threats to international peace and security posed by such weapons, while protecting the inherent right of all member states to the means for their self-defence.

Since conventional weapons will be with us all for a while to come, it is eminently sensible for states to consult amongst themselves to discover practical confidence-building measures that will at least ensure that the competition to make, test, use, and sell such arms takes place within some generally-agreed constraints. At best, agreement on confidence-building measures may alleviate pressures to acquire such weaponry, to augment existing stockpiles, or to develop new weapons, while reducing the risks of war.

Again, how is the world to arrive at such undertakings if not through a patient, deliberative process? What better place to consider such initiatives on a global scale than in the United Nations, whose first purpose in the Charter is to maintain international peace and security? And what place in the United Nations system is more appropriate and relevant for sustained deliberation of the principles and mechanisms to approach this specific issue than the Disarmament Commission?

Conclusion

Distinguished delegates,

By any definition, these are trying times for advocates of security through disarmament. We meet today in a tragic wartime environment caused by the failure of the Security Council to agree on a collective course of action to achieve the disarmament of Iraq. We face persisting threats from weapons of mass destruction -- actual weapons in the custody of states, and potential weapons in the hands of non-state actors. We see the continued production, storage, and transportation of materials that can be used in the manufacture of such weapons. We see a thriving arms trade and continued reports of civilian casualties from the use of conventional arms around the world. And we see the costs such developments are imposing on the social and economic development of virtually all states.

Yet this must not be all we see. The Commission must never underestimate the actual or potential support that exists among the people for concrete initiatives to liberate them from the prospect of war or the threat of war. Motivated by public expectations, stimulated by enlightened leadership, and recognizing the clear material and social benefits of achieving a world without nuclear weapons and with responsible controls over conventional arms, the Commission -- though in its 51st year -- may have only just begun to demonstrate its full potential.

In this, my last statement to the Commission as Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, I wish you success in your deliberations. I am confident that this institution will indeed fulfill its potential.

¹ A/CN.10/2003/WG.1/WP.1.