

Statement before the United Nations Disarmament Commission

By

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Let me begin by congratulating you, Ambassador Andrzej Towpik, on your election as Chairman of the Disarmament Commission at this session, and also by commending the work of the former Chairman, Ambassador Piet de Klerk. I assure all delegations that the Office for Disarmament Affairs will do all that it can to assist the Commission in the weeks ahead.

One of my goals today will be to attempt to place our deliberations in some historical context, for that context is shaping our work in many ways. It is, of course, no secret that the Commission has encountered its share of difficulties in recent years. It has been unable to adopt new guidelines for a full decade. Some critics, who may not fully understand the Commission's mandate or history, have questioned its usefulness and doubted its contributions to disarmament.

Clearly, the Commission's difficulties in consensus-building have a long history, dating back to its establishment in 1952, following the collapse of earlier United Nations efforts in nuclear disarmament and conventional arms control. In its first special session devoted to disarmament, in 1978, the General Assembly re-established the Commission as a deliberative body with a mandate to consider and make recommendations to the Assembly on disarmament issues. By 1999, the Commission had fulfilled its mandate by adopting, by consensus, 16 texts of principles, guidelines or recommendations, all of which were summarized by the Secretary-General in a note to the General Assembly dating from that same year, contained in document A/51/182/Rev.1. Outside the scope of my prepared text, I must add that I myself worked in the Commission as Chair of one of its subcommissions back in the 1980s, and we did agree on a number of recommendations to be adopted by the Assembly.

However, all this work shows that the Commission has been able to make progress, even at times of great uncertainty and international tension. The atmosphere today is quite different: the cold war is over, and we have all witnessed a new cascade of disarmament initiatives. We have seen new proposals from the nuclear-weapon States, from former senior statesmen of several countries and from groups in civil society. Japan and Australia have established a new International Commission to focus on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation issues. Last October, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon made his own five-point proposal on nuclear disarmament. All of these add to the many nuclear disarmament resolutions adopted each year by the General Assembly.

We have also seen a cascade of initiatives to address challenges posed by conventional armaments, including cluster munitions, the trade in conventional arms, the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, explosive remnants of war and landmines. In addition, amid a global financial crisis, public demands are growing for new limits on military spending.

Together, all of these issues constitute the agenda of general and complete disarmament under effective international control, which the General Assembly has designated as our collective ultimate objective. If the Disarmament Commission was able to reach consensus in difficult times, it can surely find the political will to move forward when the political environment is significantly improving.

The Commission continues to perform a useful role in the broader United Nations disarmament machinery. Unlike the General Assembly and the Conference on Disarmament, the Commission provides a forum for focused deliberation on two or three specific items with the goal of achieving a consensus that could strengthen or create disarmament norms. This special ability to focus its deliberations helps to define the Commission's place in the division of labour in the United Nations disarmament machinery. That is the Commission's "value added" within the system.

I therefore wish to commend the many efforts that have already been made, both from this podium and among delegations, to resume the productive work of this Commission. I know the difficulties that lie ahead. We know that the issues are complex and that the process of reaching consensus is never easy. Yet, if these issues were easy to address, they would never have been brought here in the first place. The substantive issues before this Commission are here precisely because they are difficult, and that makes the process of consensus-building all the more important.

Given the importance of such issues, I hope that the Commission will be able to adopt an agenda for this session and that it will engage in meaningful and productive discussions over the weeks ahead. I wish all delegations well in their efforts to find some common ground and reiterate my own Office's determination to assist delegations' efforts in any way we can. I look forward to working with them for a successful outcome of this session.