PREPARATORY COMMITTEE FOR THE SPECIAL
SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
DEVOTED TO DISARMAMENT

Letter dated 9 June 1977 from the Permanent Representative of
Mauritius to the United Nations addressed to the Secretariat
of the United Nations

In view of the importance of the statement by the Secretary-General at the
opening of the Preparatory Committee for the Special Session of the General Assembly
Devoted to Disarmament, I have the honour to request that the text of His
Excellency's statement be circulated in extenso as a document of the Preparatory
Committee.

(Signed) Radha Krishna RAMPHUL
Ambassador Extraordinary
and Plenipotentiary
Statement made by the Secretary-General at the opening session of the Preparatory Committee for the Special Session of the General Assembly Devoted to Disarmament on 28 March 1977

Disarmament is a vital aspect of the primary function of the Organization, the maintenance of international peace and security, and we are now beginning the preparations for the special session which will, in all probability, be the largest, most representative gathering ever convened to consider the question of disarmament in all its aspects. Accordingly, I wish to take this opportunity to make some comments on the tasks ahead and on the role of the United Nations.

In order to tackle the question of disarmament in all its ramifications, we must examine the underlying problems of international order. During the three decades which have elapsed since the Second World War, vast transformations have occurred, and this development is continuing. The process of decolonization is nearly completed and has transformed the geopolitical map of the world. All States, regardless of their size and their economic or military potential, are increasingly active in the discussion and solution of major issues.

While fully recognizing the important role and responsibilities of the great Powers with respect to peace and security, the small and medium-sized States, the developing countries and the non-aligned States are all parties which must be involved in this time and age when the process of scientific and technological advance and democratization is producing a new form of world society. The holding of a special session on disarmament may, therefore, be an important element in the search for a more just and equitable world order. The positive results of this search are, however, constantly threatened by the continuing arms race. In an international environment dominated by the arms race, military and strategic considerations tend to shape the over-all relations between States, affecting also all other relations and transactions. Unless an end is put to the arms race and unless a vigorous process of disarmament and, particularly, nuclear disarmament is initiated, there can be no guarantee that relations among States would be, in fact, based on the principles of national independence and sovereignty, of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other States, of full equality of rights, of non-resort to force or to the threat of force and of the right of every people to decide its own destiny.

It is, therefore, evident that the United Nations cannot be expected to function on the basis of the Charter and international law unless we succeed in making major progress in the field of disarmament. Only then will it be possible to create a system of world order based on collective responsibility and a climate of international confidence.

The vast arsenals already accumulated and the ongoing race to produce new arms make the peace and security of our world less stable. Stocks of nuclear weapons in the possession of the nuclear Powers have already for many years been sufficient to destroy the world many times over. Still, the number of nuclear
warheads has increased fivefold in the last eight years. In addition, these weapons are constantly being diversified and their performance characteristics improved. Already today we observe the development by the major Powers, of new generations and types of nuclear weapons that are smaller in power but more accurate in finding their intended targets. This can lead to a gradual erosion of the dividing line between the use of nuclear and conventional weapons. The danger of a further spread of nuclear weapons increases with every year as the art of nuclear technology becomes more widely known. The so-called conventional weapons are becoming increasingly sophisticated and deadly.

At the same time, we see a discussion among scientists of the possibilities of development of new, even more dangerous weapons of mass destruction, which would face mankind with additional innumerable hazards. In this situation there is only one road available that leads the world towards a peaceful and prosperous future, and that road is towards disarmament.

Progress in disarmament is also needed in order to end the present trend of a massive diversion to military ends of financial resources, manpower, raw materials, technical skills and research and development capability. There is today a greater awareness that the world is facing a series of urgent and important problems which will require the mobilization of all our energies and resources for their solution. Chief among these questions is the problem of development and the associated task of establishing a new international economic order. There are, consequently, large claims on investment, research and other resources in direct competition with military demands. The arms race with its economic costs and social and political effects constitutes the single most massive obstacle to effective progress.

For a number of years, world military expenditure has been around $300 billion per year. Every year, the military absorbs resources equivalent to about two thirds of the aggregate gross national product of the countries which together comprise the poorest half of the world's population.

The vast benefits which could result from even trifling reductions in arms expenditures are evident in many fields. So, for example, the World Health Organization has spent about $33 million over 10 years to eradicate smallpox in the world. That amount would not even suffice to buy a single modern supersonic bomber. The World Health programme to eradicate malaria in the world at an estimated cost of some $50 million, is dragging on due to lack of funds. Yet its total cost over the years is only half of what is spent every day for military purposes.

In the area of nutrition, half a billion people are severely malnourished. A large proportion of young children in developing countries are blocked in their physical and mental development because of diet deficiencies with incalculable consequences for the next generation. In recent years famine has struck entire regions of the world. At the World Food Conference in 1974 it was estimated that development assistance to agriculture needed to be stepped up to $5.6 billion annually for the remainder of this decade.

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While fund commitments for this purpose have risen substantially since then, they are still off the target of $2-3 billion. A reduction of the military budgets of industrialized countries by a mere 1 per cent would be sufficient to close this gap.

In the field of scientific and technological capability the diversion of resources to military ends is most massive. It is estimated that 25 per cent of the world's scientific manpower is engaged in military-related pursuits and that 40 per cent of all research and development spending in the world is devoted to military purposes.

It is estimated that for the world as a whole, altogether 60 million people are engaged in military-related occupations, uniformed or civilian, public or private. This corresponds to the entire labour force in manufacturing in Europe outside the Soviet Union, or to 70 per cent of the total employed in the United States in all branches of activity. The arms race and the military expenditures thus create a burden on all peoples and interfere with the economic development of all States. Today, when the international community has accepted the objective of a new international economic order, this burden should no longer be tolerated.

Effective disarmament is, therefore, needed to release resources for the peaceful development of all, and especially of the developing countries. Disarmament must be a vital part of our attempts to restructure the world order, politically, economically and socially. The need is today greater than ever.

It is obvious that relieving the cold war atmosphere has had an important effect in relaxing the international climate, thereby diminishing the risk that peripheral conflicts will escalate into nuclear war. Improvement of international co-operation, as recognized in the Helsinki Declaration on Security and Co-operation in Europe, is a prerequisite for a lessening of tensions. But détente has not extended to all areas of the world and it has not yet been able to lead to a real breakthrough in the process of disarmament.

Looking back over the disarmament efforts since the Second World War, there have been some, although modest, achievements. With the exception of the Convention prohibiting biological weapons, the results have been in the nature of arms limitation rather than disarmament. The thrust has been on regulating competition in armaments, proscribing certain developments deemed to be particularly destabilizing, costly or otherwise unacceptable, rather than an attempt to substantially reduce important weapons systems.

There is, today a growing realization that in the context of a rapidly innovating arms race such an approach is bound to fail. Technological inventions tend to outstrip the pace of negotiations. The momentum of the arms race makes it circumvent the too weak barriers that have been built to stop it.

Partial and collateral measures can play a role in the cessation and subsequent reversal of the arms race only if they are conceived as part of a
broader programme, aimed at substantial disarmament in areas of weaponry of central military significance ultimately leading to general and complete disarmament and, particularly, nuclear disarmament under effective international control.

What is needed, then, is a comprehensive approach to disarmament that is aimed at real disarmament and which is realistic concerning both the possibilities of disarmament and the dangers of a continued lack of decisive progress.

It is in realization of this need of a new approach that the General Assembly has taken the decisive step to call for a special session devoted to disarmament. I hope that this initiative will become a turning point in our search for disarmament and thereby move us closer to attaining the broad objectives for which the United Nations was created. But there must be a willingness on the part of all to participate actively in what may be a very difficult and long drawn-out process.

There is a need to carry out the most careful preparations for the special session so that when it is convened, States will come to it with a readiness to overcome their political differences, to discuss openly and to negotiate in good faith. There should also be an involvement by world public opinion and the organizations, governmental and non-governmental, that are active in mobilizing this opinion. The United Nations General Assembly has repeatedly stressed that absolute priority should be assigned to nuclear disarmament. While we are meeting today, important negotiations between the Soviet Union and the United States have just resumed in Moscow in an effort to overcome the present difficulties in their strategic talks. It is my earnest hope that the parties will reach agreement on important qualitative limitations and substantial reductions of their strategic nuclear weapons systems. Proposals have also been made, some agreements reached, and further negotiations are under way on such measures as the discontinuance of nuclear-weapon-free zones, preventing an arms race on the sea-bed, prohibition of the use of nuclear weapons, etc. It is my firm belief that only by halting the production of nuclear weapons and the liquidation of the existing stocks can one ultimately eliminate the danger of their further horizontal proliferation and the prevention of a nuclear holocaust.

Importance should also be attached to the adoption of measures in the field of chemical and biological weapons, incendiary and other conventional weapons, as well as to partial measures of disarmament, the reduction of military expenditures, and other means of military disengagement, leading eventually to general and in complete disarmament, which was proclaimed as the main goal of the United Nations more than a decade ago.

Under the prevailing circumstances, it is essential to give the United Nations an enhanced role in the field of disarmament. It was in this spirit that I proposed, two years ago, that the General Assembly should consider a basic review of the role of the United Nations in disarmament. I asked what could be done, in practical and realistic terms, to strengthen the role of the United Nations such a way that the necessary progress could be achieved in this field. I made at that time some concrete proposals concerning information and studies on disarmament,
the conduct of relevant discussions and negotiations, as well as for the follow-up of disarmament agreements reached. I am pleased with the response of the General Assembly to this proposal. The measures adopted constitute a beginning that should be continued with determination.

The special session should be a turning point in our efforts to promote real and substantial measures aimed at achieving the ultimate goal of general and complete disarmament under effective international control. I wish to assure you that we in the Secretariat will spare no effort to contribute to the successful preparation for and conclusion of the special session.

The international community is at the crossroads. People expect the United Nations to act to put an end to the arms race. The task is complex. Let us try, through mutual co-operation and understanding, to fulfill their high expectations.