A Nuclear-Weapon-Free, Peaceful and Just World: 
The Relevance of the UN Charter

By

Angela Kane
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

Written statement presented at the
2013 World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs

Nagasaki, Japan
7 August 2013
I wish to begin by expressing my deep appreciation for this honour of returning to Nagasaki to participate in the 2013 Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs. It is deeply gratifying to be in the company of so many strong supporters of nuclear disarmament, including your distinguished Mayor, Tomihisa Taue, who has contributed so much to this field. I also wish to thank Mr. Hiroshi Taka, the co-chair of your Steering Committee, for inviting me and to commend all of his associates who have worked hard in organizing this important annual conference.

Actually, I would like to go a step further and thank everybody associated with these conferences for their dedicated efforts over many years on behalf of achieving a world free of nuclear weapons. Working both as individuals and in groups, you have done much to educate the public about the importance of this work.

You have devoted your time and energy to ensuring that Nagasaki will be the very last city to ever be attacked with nuclear weapons, a goal long shared by the hibakusha and their families. Your publications, rallies, and petitions have helped to inspire similar activities in other countries. Even more impressive, you have undertaken these pursuits not for power, wealth, publicity, or fame—but because nuclear disarmament is the right thing to do. It is in the interests of everyone, not just the few, and this is why Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has referred to a world without nuclear weapons as a “global public good of the highest order.”

This work you are doing is especially important because we are all—myself included—tempted at times to fall into despair at the obstacles and setbacks we have encountered in seeking to advance global nuclear disarmament. We are troubled by the lack of consistency between reassuring official words of support for the goal of nuclear disarmament, versus the existence of policies that embrace nuclear deterrence, threats of nuclear annihilation, the modernization of nuclear warheads and their delivery systems, and the refusal to consider—as the Secretary-General has proposed—negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention or agreement on a framework of separate, mutually reinforcing instruments with the same goal.

While your frustrations are justified, none of this is a cause for outright despair, since there are some grounds for hope that significant progress is possible in the years ahead, possibly even sooner.

Consider how far we have travelled already to a nuclear-weapon-free world. In the mid-1980s there were reportedly about 76,000 nuclear weapons globally. Today’s estimates say that the number is less than 20,000. This consistently downward trend indicates something much more than simply the retirement of old weapons. It symbolizes both a growing recognition among the public about the unacceptability of using such weapons, as well as growing doubts even inside possessor States of the military value of such weapons. The world is seeing these weapons for what they are—morally repugnant, militarily useless, an outrageous waste of financial and technological resources, and a hindrance to social and economic development.
This is, of course, why you have wisely selected the theme for this year’s Conference as “A Nuclear-Weapon-Free, Peaceful and Just World”. How can there be peace in a world as long as nuclear weapons remain deployed, justified as the “ultimate guarantee” of security, and ready for use on a moment’s notice? The very existence of nuclear weapons and their associated doctrine of nuclear deterrence virtually invites proliferation by other countries, further jeopardizing world peace and security. And we all recognize the need to ensure that such weapons are never acquired by non-state actors. What is less often recognized, however, is how nuclear disarmament—with its verification measures, irreversibility, transparency, universal application, and binding commitments—would do more than any alternative means to prevent this nuclear terrorism that everyone justifiably fears.

Sometimes we hear people saying that while nuclear disarmament may be desirable as a long term goal or vision, it must await the satisfaction of various conditions before it can be achieved. Some say, let’s first achieve world peace. Let’s end the risk of all armed conflicts. Let’s resolve all regional disputes. Let’s reduce the risk of terrorism to zero. All of these, of course, are noble goals. Yet none or any combination of these should be used as a pretext for delaying indefinitely an arrangement providing for a prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons.

In this sense, progress in nuclear disarmament can be much more than a mere effect of something else. It can also be a cause—a factor that can independently and significantly strengthen international peace and security. This progress serves a powerful confidence-building measure, certainly at the level of competition in strategic nuclear weaponry. If arsenals are being dramatically reduced, if modernization programmes are being shelved or cancelled, if nuclear-weapons budgets are declining, if disarmament agencies are being created and related legislation is being enacted—these together can serve as an extraordinarily effective antidote to nuclear arms races. And the same applies in regional situations—especially the Middle East, South Asia, and Northeast Asia—where the very existence of nuclear-weapon-related programmes has given rise to new instabilities, new uncertainties, and new risks that nuclear weapons will one day be used again.

In an ideal world, reason and persuasive logic would be enough to ensure the achievement of a world free of nuclear weapons. But we are very far from such a world. Today’s nuclear weapons exist not just because of the various rationales provided for their continued existence. They exist also because of their large network of support, as seen in the large weapons budgets, and political support from large laboratories and contractors, and other vested interests that stand to benefit from the perpetuation forever of these weapons. To these special interests, threats to international peace and security are not so much a problem to be solved, than a reason to maintain and expand support for these nuclear arsenals.

Signs of this nuclear-weapons infrastructure of support are apparent in each country that possesses such weapons. But fortunately, these interests do not always
dictate public policies nor do they control the scope of the public debate when it comes to nuclear weapons.

This is especially apparent at the United Nations—both in the Secretariat and in the statements and activities of most of our Member States—where there is a very deep awareness that the UN organization has been working for nuclear disarmament for over six decades. Yet here today, I would like emphasize that this is not the UN’s only goal, nor a goal we are pursuing in total isolation of other goals we also highly value.

For example, while it is true that we have been seeking the total elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD), we have also been working simultaneously to try to limit and reduce conventional arms. The reasons are obvious. If we awake one day and discover that all nuclear weapons have disappeared, we will still have to deal with the insecurities and disparities that exist due to the remaining conventional weapons. We do not seek to eliminate nuclear weapons so that conventional wars can take the place of the nuclear arms race.

It is this deep awareness of the implications of unrestrained competition in conventional arms that finally gave rise to the successful negotiation this year of the Arms Trade Treaty, a truly historic development because of the extent that it contributed to bringing the rule of law to the domain of conventional arms. It is through pursuing simultaneously both WMD disarmament and conventional arms control that we are working at the UN to strengthen international peace and security in a world without nuclear weapons. We do not expect that nuclear disarmament will ever occur at the expense of security—we believe that its best chances of occurring will exist when States and their citizens realize that their safety and security will be much improved in a world free of such weapons.

But this means more than just pursuing WMD disarmament and conventional arms control. This is why we are also working to strengthen observance of other key goals of the UN Charter, especially those relating to the prohibition of threats or use of force and the duty to settle international disputes by peaceful means.

Beyond this, the UN is also working to improve humanity’s living conditions, prospects for social and economic development, while—as the Charter’s Preamble declares—establishing “conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international can be maintained.”

I am emphasizing today these various components of the Charter system because they help us all to understand how disarmament is an indispensable part of this larger picture. Under this system, achieving disarmament, advancing conventional arms control, ending threats of use of force, solving disputes peacefully, promoting social and economic development, and strengthening the pursuit of justice and the rule of law—these are all interdependent parts of the same system, and they must be pursued simultaneously because they are all mutually reinforcing. This is how the Charter was intended to work and nobody has yet contrived an alternative system to work better on a
global scale to address these challenges. These certainly cannot be accomplished through reliance on the balance of power, competition between alliances, nuclear deterrence, or endlessly rising military expenditures.

So here we are in 2013, and my central message to you today is that a good case can be made that we should look backward before we look ahead. We have an exceptional blueprint right in front of us—the UN Charter—which offers constructive guidance on achieving goals that are strongly supported by everyone in this room today and by all your fellow citizens literally across the globe.

Disarmament—arms control—peace—development—justice—and the rule of law. These are the signposts to guide us to a safer and more prosperous world. And these are the kinds of themes also embodied in the official title of this 2013 Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs.

As you continue your efforts in the field of disarmament, I urge you to recall some words from the famous “Russell-Einstein Manifesto” of 1955, where the authors made a moving plea for disarmament, emphasizing “We appeal as human beings to human beings: Remember your humanity, and forget the rest.”

A few years later, Kenzaburo Oe—Japan’s great Nobel Laureate in Literature—similarly wrote that “The most terrifying monster lurking in the darkness of Hiroshima is precisely the possibility that man might become no longer human.”

It is perhaps no coincidence that nuclear disarmament advocates are returning in large numbers to focus on the humanitarian consequences from the use of nuclear weapons. This is apparent both in meetings of States Parties of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and in several arenas of the UN disarmament machinery. This is a theme very familiar to all associated with the annual Conferences Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs.

So I wish today to compliment you on having correctly diagnosed the essence of the challenge of eliminating nuclear weapons. They are incompatible with our basic humanity. It is this powerful message that helps to give me some hope for the future of nuclear disarmament. And it is this message that I hope will continue to inspire your own future efforts in this great cause.

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2 Kenzaburo Oe, Hiroshima Notes (David Swain, Toshi Yonezawa trans.), New York: Marion Boyers, 1995, p. 182.