Remarks at the Breakfast meeting of the International Service Division

Rotary International

By

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Before proceeding, I wish to thank Josef Klee for inviting me to this informal discussion meeting. It is an honour for me to meet with you today.

My words of thanks, however, extend to you and all of your colleagues in Rotary International for your many activities on behalf of humanity around the world. You have some extraordinary achievements in polio eradication, in reducing hunger, in promoting literacy, and in strengthening peace. For many years you have worked with the United Nations in pursuing such worthy goals and I am very pleased indeed that disarmament is among them.

I have been asked this morning to discuss the UN’s disarmament activities.

The best way to think about our work in this field is to view it as part of the wider framework of United Nations activities and norms to strengthen international peace and security.

In other words, we do not view disarmament as an end in itself. It is instead an indispensable element in a peace and security system based on the UN Charter.

We seek, first of all, the prohibition and total elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, specifically chemical and biological weapons. This is our primary disarmament objective and it is one of the oldest goals of the UN and one of its longest sustained activities. It was the subject of the General Assembly’s first resolution in 1946.
Nuclear disarmament is our highest priority because of the uniquely destructive humanitarian and environmental effects of such weapons—these are weapons that were specifically designed to have massive, indiscriminate effects. Over the years, we have witnessed global stockpiles of such weapons decline from over 70,000 during the Cold War to a level today of under 20,000. A majority of UN Member States now are members of regional nuclear-weapon-free zones—virtually the entire Southern Hemisphere. Yet a majority of the world’s population still lives in states that either possess such weapons or are members of nuclear alliances.

We are working to promote nuclear disarmament through our official statements, publications, conferences of relevant multilateral treaties, annual resolutions of the General Assembly, educational programmes, and close cooperation with the Permanent Missions and with individuals and groups in civil society.

With respect to nuclear weapons, we see the impressive statistic of 190 States that have joined the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The NPT contains specific legal obligations relating to non-proliferation, the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and negotiations on nuclear disarmament—and goals in each of these areas were included in a 64-point Action Plan adopted by consensus at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. While the treaty does not outlaw nuclear weapons per se, the International Court of Justice has interpreted Article VI as encompassing not only the duty to pursue negotiations in good faith, but also the responsibility to bring such negotiations to a conclusion. Yet there still is no nuclear weapons convention nor are there any negotiations underway in nuclear disarmament, as proposed by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in his five-point proposal of 24 October 2008.

We have two multilateral conventions approaching universal membership that outlaw biological and chemical weapons. These conventions have established—and are helping to sustain—a global taboo against the very existence of such weapons. Today, nobody is boasting the vital benefits of such weapons for national security, or insisting upon the legality of using them. And nobody is putting forward chemical or biological weapons as a means to maintain a doctrine of extended deterrence to defend allies.

Our second major goal—and when I say “our” I mean the Secretary-General, Secretariat and collective body of our Member States—is to limit and regulate conventional arms. The conclusion this year of the Arms Trade Treaty was a landmark event—it marks a significant step forward in ensuring that international arms transfers are undertaken within a system of norms to prevent their illicit use. In addition, we have witnessed some significant progress in curbing the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. We now have international treaties outlawing anti-personnel landmines, cluster munitions, and various other inhumane weapons.
We also have been seeking to explore ways of reducing military expenditures worldwide. One way we do this is by promoting transparency of information about those expenditures. We issue an annual report on military expenditures that seeks to give the public an accurate picture of the resources being allocated for military purposes.

Last year, the world spent over $1.7 trillion on military expenditures, a figure that dramatically overshadows much smaller amounts allocated in aid to developing countries. This figure even towers well above the roughly $2.5 billion annual regular budget of the United Nations.

Of course, you at Rotary International understand well the opportunity costs of that massive expenditure on arms. You know the scale of unmet human needs around the world, perhaps best represented by the Millennium Development Goals. Even a small shift of resources from arms to poverty-reduction, housing and health care would have tremendous benefits for millions of people worldwide.

But as I said, all of these activities form only a part—a key part to be sure—of a broader security system based on the Charter. Disarmament and arms control help to reinforce its primary norms—namely, the prohibition of the threat or use of force, and the duty to resolve disputes by peaceful means. All of these have to be pursued together because they are mutually reinforcing. Disarmament, peace, security, and human welfare are not alternatives—they function together to improve the quality of life on this planet.

The United Nations benefits greatly from dedicated efforts of service organizations like Rotary International and I warmly welcome your support for our wide-ranging efforts in the field of disarmament. We have a long journey ahead. It is only through working in expanding partnership with groups and countries worldwide that we can together reach our common destination. We share a great common cause, and I very much look forward to our journey together.