OPENING STATEMENT

By

Angela Kane
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

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Excellencies, distinguished members of the Advisory Board, I wish to welcome you to the United Nations at the start of your sixty-first session. Though he was unable to be here with you today, I am pleased to inform you that the Secretary-General intends to join you on the final day of your session this week. On his behalf, I convey his best wishes to you for a productive session.

At the outset, I have the honour to congratulate Ambassador Istvan Gyarmati as the new Chairman of the Advisory Board. I wish to thank Desmond Bowen for his service as Chairman last year. Thanks are also owed to the other departing member of the Board, Francois Rivasseau, for his valuable contributions. And I warmly welcome your two new members, Vicente Garrido-Rebolledo and Camille Grand. I wish to assure you all that the Office for Disarmament Affairs will continue to assist you throughout your work this year.

Last year was a time of major renewal for the Board. I congratulate you on your ability to go beyond official talking points and to draw upon your professional experiences and creativity. Your purpose here is to act not as representatives of your national governments, but rather as independent thinkers and innovators. Your function, and the advice you prepare for the Secretary-General, is an essential component of the United Nations disarmament machinery. I encourage you to build upon your successful work last year and to continue to act as an engine for progressive ideas to advance our collective disarmament aspirations.

You have two important issues before you this year.

Verification remains an essential element in the negotiation and implementation of arms limitation and disarmament agreements. The General Assembly has endorsed this concept as a disarmament principle for more than 25 years and its significance was widely apparent long before that.

In 1988, the United Nations Disarmament Commission made an important contribution to this field. Building upon the work of the first special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament, it elaborated a non-exhaustive list of 16 general principles related to verification. While I won’t read that list to you, it suffices to say that those principles constitute a fundamental guide for the development of disarmament verification regimes and reflect benchmarks against which we can measure their effectiveness.

Through the past work of the United Nations, the field of verification sits on top of a strong normative foundation. Yet, as we look across the range of arms control and disarmament regimes, the realization of verification principles has been at times difficult to attain. This is certainly true when it comes to the elimination of weapons of mass destruction.

Of the three primary international instruments, only one – the chemical weapons convention – has a comprehensive verification regime. Verification under the NPT can be considered only partial at best, given that it safeguards regimes focuses only on horizontal proliferation and then, only in a non-comprehensive manner. And as you know, the obligations in the Biological Weapons Convention are not subject to any verification at all.

There are many reasons for this fragmented application of verification to disarmament. They include political sensitivities, security considerations, practicality or just too high of a
financial cost. Often, the key factor can simply be the lack of sufficiently developed technology and techniques. In that connection, in considering this item, the Secretary-General has asked you to focus especially on verification technologies.

The technological constraint has been particularly acute when it comes to nuclear weapons. Concerns over the possibility of remotely detecting any clandestine development or manufacture of nuclear weapons led to a non-proliferation regime that focuses mainly on fissile material production instead. Concerns over the technical state-of-the art held back the conclusion of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty for decades; and lingering concerns in that regard are still used as fodder to block progress on that Treaty in at least one capital. And some still see disarmament as hindered by concerns over the creation of a fool-proof scheme to oversee the dismantlement of nuclear warheads and to account for the past production of fissile materials.

Turning to your other agenda item, for the third consecutive session, the Secretary-General has asked you to focus on the disarmament and security implications of emerging technologies. The reason for his continued interest in this matter should be apparent to all. Twenty-six years ago, the General Assembly asked the Secretary-General to follow scientific and technological developments and their impact on international security. The expert group established to further study the matter expressed concern, even then, that technological developments in the military sphere were outpacing the political process of seeking security at lower levels of armaments and armed forces.

Of course, there are some existing mechanisms to address the possible unintended effects of new weapon systems. For instance, Article 36 of the first Additional Protocol to the 1949 Geneva Convention obliges all parties to determine whether the employment of any new weapon would be prohibited, in some or all circumstances, by any rule of international law. Yet, the mere existence of an international legal obligation is often not enough – the most effective international regimes have many other pillars of support; measures for confidence-building, transparency, verification and enforcement, to name a few. In the absence of comprehensive and sophisticated international governance in the area of armaments, the international community must remain eternally vigilant. History has shown us that we do not need to wait for a threat to emerge fully before we can take action.

Last year, your work on emerging technologies – and in particular on autonomous weapon systems – made a big impact. The Secretary-General carried forward your recommendations, namely the promotion of coordinated efforts within the United Nations framework or in an existing forum to address the possible need for disarmament measures. Subsequently, the High Contracting Parties to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons decided to convene an informal meeting of experts, which will further study this issue in May.

Just one good and well-timed idea can reap dividends in our collective efforts to ameliorate or prevent unacceptable harm which may result from the unchecked development of military technology. In that spirit, I encourage you to continue to think boldly as you resume your deliberations on emerging technologies.
Your work last year helped to reaffirm the central relevance of the United Nations in the field of disarmament. I look forward to seeing the results of your deliberations. I wish you good luck and all the best in the days and months ahead of you.