Statement by the High Representative to the informal meeting of the General Assembly on the International Day Against Nuclear Testing

Toward Zero: Resolving the Contradictions

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At the outset I want to extend my sincere appreciation to the President of the General Assembly, Mr Sam Kutesa, and to the Government of Kazakhstan for arranging this informal session, it is a reflection of their dedication to this important cause.

[High ranking Kazakhstan representative], Distinguished colleagues on the dais

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

In the coming months world leaders will meet to decide the core international development agenda and the international community will attempt to find a path forward on climate change.

Today we discuss a third existential issue – the issue of nuclear weapons.

In the automotive industry, they are always looking for the fastest way to get from zero to one hundred. Those of us engaged in nuclear disarmament take the opposite perspective – we are looking for the fastest possible way of getting from sixteen thousand to zero!

Together, we have taken great strides in nuclear disarmament. We have seen massive reductions in deployed nuclear weapons – 80 per cent in some cases. We have also seen the shuttering of nuclear weapons facilities and the diminution of nuclear weapons in national security strategies.

I do not wish to date myself, but as a child of the Cold War who can remember nuclear arsenals numbering tens of thousands and hundreds of nuclear tests, this represents real progress.

Most positively, all of us recognize that these weapons must be eliminated. This is reflected in hundreds of statements, resolutions and agreements, many of them articulated in this building.

In other words, the goal of world free of nuclear weapons is one that we all share.

Unfortunately, as an international community, we appear to have come to a crossroads in how to achieve this goal. We all agree upon the destination, but disagree on the road we should take to arrive there.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The 64-point action plan agreed to at the 2010 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, or NPT, was a remarkable achievement and a true example of international consensus.

Since that time, contending visions have emerged on how to advance this shared cause.

Some States consider that a gradual, step-by-step approach based on building blocks is the most effective way to move forward.
Others call for the commencement of negotiations on a comprehensive nuclear weapon convention that would provide for the total elimination of nuclear weapons within a specified timeframe.

Another group of States has emerged that are concerned with the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. The large number of States that attended the humanitarian conferences is a testament to the concern a great many feel about this issue.

These contending views were starkly apparent during the 2015 NPT Review Conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Dwelling on what divides us will not solve our problems. As the Secretary-General has consistently said, we need to work together to find common ground and a way forward. We need to remember that the potential for nuclear war threatens us all – it is a matter of collective security.

It is true that we live in an increasingly complex security environment. It is one that includes rising East-West tensions, the rise of new global powers, the growth of powerful non-state actors, and the emergence of new security issues such as cyber threats.

Yet we cannot allow the security environment to prevent us from making progress on nuclear disarmament. We should remember the lessons of the Cold War when arms control agreements provided valuable opportunities to reduce strategic tension.

Despite the absence of a consensus outcome, States at the 2015 Review Conference came close to establishing a possible way forward in the form of a new open-ended working group to be established by the General Assembly.

Its mandate would have been to elaborate effective measures and other arrangements to achieve and maintain a nuclear-weapon-free world.

It remains to be seen whether this approach can meet the expectations held by the proponents of the various contending visions. I hope Member States will be able to take discussion forward in an inclusive environment, including those States not party to the NPT.

There are also other important measures that have near universal support that can be pursued. These include the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, negotiation of a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty and a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction.

Each of these should be a priority for the international community, but as today is focused on the ending of nuclear tests, I'd like to specifically mention the CTBT.
This Treaty – which can help prevent the quantitative and qualitative development of nuclear weapons – was negotiated nearly twenty years ago. Its entry-into-force is long overdue. The eight remaining Annex 2 States have a special responsibility to bring the CTBT into force.

However, there are over twenty non-Annex 2 States that have not signed or ratified the Treaty. The ratification by all of these States would be meaningful steps towards the universalization of the norm against testing. The United Nations is ready to provide whatever assistance it can to help with this process.

Ladies and Gentlemen

In his statement, last year, on the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, Secretary-General Ban said: “What matters most is not which path is taken, but that the chosen path is heading in the right direction — towards the internationally agreed goal of the total elimination of nuclear weapons.”

We cannot delay in taking the path to nuclear disarmament. We must act with urgency to reach our goal of zero nuclear weapons. And we must do so with a sense of compromise and our common responsibility to rid the world of these devastating weapons.