Remarks to the opening session of the

2016 session of the UN Disarmament Commission

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Chairman Tevi
Distinguished Bureau
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I bring you the greetings on behalf of the Secretary-General.

At the outset, I wish to congratulate Ambassador Tevi on his appointment as Chair. I know that you – the Member States – will give him your complete support.

Secondly, I thank the outgoing chair, Ambassador Seck, for his excellent leadership in 2015.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the chairs of the Commission’s two working groups, Ambassador Kairat Abdrakhmanov of Kazakhstan, and Mr. Bouchaib Eloumi of Morocco, for their tireless work in 2015.

The Disarmament Commission is entering the middle phase of its current cycle during a time of deepening paralysis and divisions within multilateral disarmament bodies. These disappointments are well known to us all, from the 2015 NPT Review Conference, our inability to bring the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty into force and the lack of any further negotiations within the Conference on Disarmament.

Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that many have looked outside the traditional United Nations forums for progress. Yet, this Commission has considerable potential to demonstrate that the existing disarmament machinery can produce results.

Distinguished delegates, now I’d like to speak about the two agenda items the Commission has been working on.

First, the conventional weapons item.

In recent cycles, the Commission has made important progress toward consensus on its conventional weapons item. This has come as the international community has made important strides forward on this part of the disarmament agenda. These have included the first ever legally-binding regulations governing the international arms trade, greater success at combatting the illicit trade in small arms, dealing with the problems posed by excess and poorly maintained stocks of ammunition, as well as in agreeing to tackle new challenges like the threat posed by improvised explosive devices.

We have also continuously made progress in the improvement of its confidence-building mechanisms in the field of conventional arms control, including the United Nations Arms Register and the Report on Military Expenditures.

I hope the continued deliberations by the Commission on its conventional arms item builds upon and consolidates these gains. The time has come for the Commission to start finally bringing its consideration of this item to a successful conclusion.

Secondly, on the matter of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, however, the gap remains wide. Over the past eleven months, views on the way forward have grown increasingly polarized and entrenched.
Work will resume next month in Geneva on the elaboration of effective legal measures for nuclear disarmament. Even as that process continues, the Disarmament Commission still maintains a unique and distinct role, especially in light of its history of consensus-building.

In this regard, I encourage you to make use of the unique nature of this body, as a deliberative and consensus-based body that continues to enjoy universal participation. This dynamic should enable you to pursue constructive dialogue involving all key stakeholders and aimed at bringing us back to a common vision on how to achieve a nuclear-weapon-free world.

Ladies and Gentlemen, now I’d like to move on to a possible third agenda item.

The need for simultaneous progress on multiple questions of disarmament has never been more apparent. We are faced by the rapid emergence of new trends and technologies that are complicating strategic relationships and stability. This includes the development of advanced new types of strategic weapons. It also includes a growing nexus between terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and cyber threats.

Areas where the United Nations has recently made progress include addressing the challenges of outer space security and sustainability and in clarifying how international norms pertaining to hostile and malicious acts apply in cyber space.

Of these, the issue of outer space is especially ripe for consideration in a universal body. In 2012, at the initiative of the Russian Federation, the General Assembly established a group of governmental experts on transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space activities.

That group successfully concluded its work in 2013. The General Assembly subsequently referred its report to the CD, this Commission and the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. In a remarkable demonstration of unity on matters of strategic security, China, the Russian Federation and the United States jointly sponsored that resolution.

In October last year, the First and Fourth Committee held their first ever joint ad hoc meeting on addressing the challenges of outer space security and sustainability. The meeting proved useful but ultimately revealed that further dialogue is necessary in order to reconcile the contending visions for outer space security.

The Disarmament Commission has clear authority to adopt a third agenda item at any point during its cycle, provided there is consensus. Furthermore, it has a mandate to consider such an item during its present cycle, by the terms of resolution 69/77 in which the Assembly “recommends that the Commission intensify consultations with a view to reaching agreement on the items on its agenda … keeping in mind the proposal to include a third agenda item”. Finally, resolution 70/68, adopted last year, explicitly provides for continuation of these consultations, in the context of the agenda of the Disarmament Commission.

We appreciate the efforts made by the Chair to explore common ground so that agreement on a third agenda item, possibly addressing outer space, can be achieved. Deliberations by the Commission on this issue may help to consolidate and carrying forward various proposals to ensure space remains free from conflict and unsustainable practices.
Taking up a third agenda item should and will not detract from the Commission’s work on its two existing items. Rather, it would bring the Commission back to greater productivity, thus restoring its credibility as an essential component of the United Nations disarmament machinery.

I hope you are able to make use of this session to be innovative, to break out of siloed ways of operating and demonstrate the ability of the Disarmament Commission to achieve tangible and practical results. The Office for Disarmament Affairs stands ready to assist you in any way possible.

I wish you all the best for a successful substantive session.

Thank you.