Weapons of Mass Destruction: Challenges and Solutions

Awards Ceremony for the UNSCR 1540 International Student Essay Competition

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AS PREPARED

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Ladies and Gentlemen, students

First of all, I want to extend my sincere appreciation to the Stimson Center, to Harvard University and to the 1540 Committee for their leadership in holding this competition. The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs is proud to be your partner.

In seeking to engage a vital constituency – the world’s youth, this competition is central to the purpose of the second Comprehensive Review of United Nations Security Council resolution 1540, which aims to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to non-state actors.

After twelve years, Resolution 1540 should be updated to be fit for purpose in today’s evolving security environment. This requires hearing from stakeholders across the spectrum – from academia, to civil society and the private sector.

I bring you the greetings of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Throughout his tenure the Secretary-General has been a principled advocate for a world free of weapons of mass destruction. As he told the Security Council last month, “The elimination of all weapons of mass destruction is one of the most important obligations entrusted to the international community.”

Disarmament is a founding principle of the UN. It was the subject of the first General Assembly resolution. You could say that disarmament is engraved in our DNA.

Secretary-General Ban has been steadfast in empowering the world’s youth. He has consistently called on young peacemakers to raise your voices and press your leaders for action.

Ladies and gentlemen, students

I congratulate all one hundred and fifty students who submitted essays for their passion and commitment. Those students are from over forty countries, many are from developing states. This is a testament to the universal concern about the risks posed by weapons of mass destruction. I want to briefly mention two issues of growing concern.

The first is the changing threat and risk landscape. Vicious non-state actors with no regard for human life are actively seeking chemical, biological, radiological and even nuclear weapons.
The 30 August report by the United Nations-Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Joint Investigative Mechanism was clear in its judgement that state and non-state actors used toxic chemicals as weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic.

There are reports of terrorist groups seeking to acquire biological weapons. We all witnessed the human suffering caused by the West African Ebola outbreak. Imagine the horror that could be unleashed by a similar pathogen designed to cause maximum harm.

Yet the international community remains woefully underprepared to either prevent or respond to this possibility.

The Nuclear Security Summit process made great strides in seeking to secure civil nuclear materials. Gary Samore was, of course, the principal designer and architect of this process. Thank you Gary, for your invaluable contribution. The last Washington Summit was supposed to be the last of its kind. But the process is not finished. The international community will remain vigilant in ensuring that nuclear security is a continuing priority.

These threats are compounded by a growing nexus between CBRN security, terrorism and emerging technologies – particularly cyber technologies.

As some of the contest entrants rightly pointed out, emerging technologies such as unmanned vehicles and artificial intelligence can not only benefit development, but also non-proliferation. This is especially true for verification and monitoring.

However, these same technologies could also be misused to magnify the impact of a CBRN device. The possibility of non-state actor successfully hacking a nuclear power plant or industrial chemical facility to cause widespread damage cannot be discounted. We know of multiple attempts to hack nuclear power plants. This scenario must be prevented.

The international community needs to expand common ground in the pursuit of norms and rules that will prevent the malicious use of cyber space, in particular when it comes to critical infrastructure.

Ladies and gentlemen, students

The second issue is the need for enhanced partnerships and engagement by all stakeholders, from academia and the private sector, to international and regional organisations. Eliminating weapons of mass destruction is the responsibility of all.

Unfortunately, some states still lack the capacity to administer the legislation and other instruments. As many essays rightly pointed out, this is where the international community needs to step up.
There is a growing capacity gap, particularly for developing States. We need to do better to properly match state needs with donor expertise and funds.

The UN is strengthening its partnerships, including with regional organisations such as the African Union and the Organisation of American States. Through the so-called ‘Wiesbaden process’ we are developing outreach to industry.

We need the sustained commitment and assistance of all stakeholders.

Ladies and gentlemen, students

I want to take this opportunity raise an issue that goes beyond the scope of resolution 1540. Some of the students also raised it. Resolution 1540 has been a valuable prevention tool. But we need to think in advance about ‘what if prevention fails’?

I am concerned that should the unthinkable happen, the international community is not adequately prepared. The lack of capacity to respond to a biological incident is particularly worrying. The Ebola outbreak showed how much work the UN was asked to do.

We do not have much time and we cannot fail in this endeavour. The stakes are far too high. Like our fight against climate change the consequences of inaction are far greater than the costs of acting now.

Ladies and gentlemen, students

The elimination of WMD is a topic that should be front and centre with today’s youth. You did not invent these weapons but I hope you will be the ones to eliminate them.

For that to happen, you must inform yourselves and help others become informed about the dangers to humanity posed by weapons, especially nuclear weapons.

You can voice your concerns and make them heard, through the tools you have but previous generations did not: the internet and social media. With the push of a button you can reach thousands.

Building a world safer, more secure and better for all, requires inclusive efforts by all stakeholders, including you. The challenges are many and complex.

But as Secretary-General Ban said, “nothing is impossible when we work together. Together we can build the future we want.”

I thank you so much.