Communicating the Disarmament Message

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Introduction

It is a special honour for me to be invited to speak with you tonight on the happy occasion of the tenth anniversary of Macquarie University's Centre for International Communication. The Centre has the challenging task of giving a new generation of professionals in the field of media, public affairs, and international relations the tools they will need not just to enrich themselves, but also to improve the wider world around them. And this has to be done in an era where the technological revolution has had such an impact in the world of communications. Let me quote from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Millennium Assembly Report --

It took 38 years for radio to reach 50 million people, and 13 years for television. The same number of people adopted the Internet in just four years. There were 50 pages on the World Wide Web in 1993; today there are more than 50 million. A mere 143 million people logged on
to the Internet in 1998; by 2001 the number of users will climb to 700 million.

Today, the turbulent winds of globalization are sweeping the world -- leaving no nation unaffected -- while the looming shadows of global weapons threats haunt our collective consciousness. I am sure that this Centre has much to offer in helping the world not just to understand the common dangers we all face, but to articulate a vision of a brighter future, free of wasteful military expenditures and arms races.

Australia's commitment to disarmament -- as expressed both by its government and its citizens -- has been exemplary and I am confident this country will continue its longstanding efforts to communicate its own disarmament message at every possible opportunity. Whether it be in the field of curbing the global spread of chemical and biological weapons, in putting a halt to nuclear testing, or in helping the public to understand -- as your own Nevil Shute did in his great novel, On the Beach -- the very human tragedy of nuclear war, Australia has been a vanguard of efforts to build a safer and more secure world for all.

**Bridging the Disarmament Divide**

Some of you might recall an old proverb that relates quite a bit to the challenge of communicating the disarmament message: "Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand." By and large, the record of disarmament, particularly nuclear disarmament, is replete with rhetoric and instances of studied inaction -- a record that has inspired many of its advocates to refocus their attention on the importance of building public understanding and support.

In our increasingly interdependent world, building this support depends upon a great deal of communication at all levels of governance -- local, national, subregional, regional, intergovernmental, and indeed, global. And by "communicate" I by no means intend to use the definition offered by a standard dictionary, namely to "transmit or pass on by speaking or writing." Communication is much more than a one-way affair: it is the mutual sharing of information about purposes, intents, meanings, and interests. The goal of communication I wish to emphasize is not simply to utter, but to promote mutual understanding and empathy.

My thesis is brief: even the most challenging disarmament goals are achievable, but only as a result of a process that is driven by political will and based on the collective sentiments of an informed and resolute public. There is considerable merit to another old adage -- "where there is a will there is a way" -- and the ultimate challenge of communicating the disarmament message is to shape and reinforce that public will and to translate it into political will and concrete actions.

The most difficult task of all is to reach the people: not simply to transmit information to them, but to truly stir their consciousness -- both to inform and to inspire to action. Yet despite all the
familiar data about the contemporary scope of interdependence, Secretary-General Kofi Annan has repeatedly reminded us all that half the world has not yet either made or received a telephone call. The social and economic costs of the so-called "digital divide" -- the geographic concentration in the developed countries of the revolution in information and communication technologies -- was the focus of a ministerial summit last year of the UN's Economic and Social Council and bridging this divide has now become an important goal of the United Nations organization. But the goal of this whole effort is not simply to increase the flow of information per se, but to use communication to promote development and the betterment of the human condition.

This must be the goal of disarmament as well: it seeks not to eliminate certain kinds of deadly arms and to regulate others as ends in themselves, but to serve the interests and ideals of all people in ways that they can readily comprehend. The divide that disarmament must bridge is the chasm between those who argue that security is found in the perpetual accumulation and improvement of weapons, and those who believe that security is better founded on mutual understanding, cooperation, and joint efforts to eliminate the deadliest of weapons threats. Forty years ago Eisenhower -- a military man turned elected political leader -- said in his famous "military industrial complex speech" and I quote: "Disarmament, with mutual honour and confidence, is a continuing imperative. Together we must learn how to compose differences, not with arms, but with intellect and decent purpose."

Some Alarming Trends

Too many people, however, are either not aware of the disarmament divide, or simply do not care about it. After all, the Cold War has been over for a decade. Why should anybody these days take seriously the threat of global nuclear war when erstwhile nuclear adversaries are now toasting each other with warm words and hearty embraces? Chemical and biological weapons -- the other horrible "weapons of mass destruction" -- were banned years ago by the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological Weapons Convention. In short -- why worry, especially when there is so much else to worry about more immediately?

Perhaps the best place to begin is with some stocktaking: how far has the world come in realizing its collective disarmament goals since the signing of the UN Charter in 1945? In recent years, the world has actually been moving in a direction that is opposite from the Charter's vision of a world whose security is founded on the peaceful settlement of disputes and, as the Charter states, the "least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources."

According to the recent yearbook of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), there were twenty-five major armed conflicts in the world last year -- twenty-three of which raged on inside countries -- specifically, poor countries, the countries that could least afford such a tragic waste of precious human life and scarce economic resources. SIPRI also
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reported that global military spending last year was around $800 billion -- or about $130 per person. This is an alarming figure in itself, but it is all the more troubling in that it adds to a recent trend of increased global military spending, quite in contrast to the cuts that initially followed the end of the Cold War. The highest rates of increase, once again, were in countries with enormous unmet social and economic needs in Africa and South Asia.

The Charter also called for the "establishment of a system for the regulation of armaments." A web of treaties restrains the unbridled development, stockpiling, and transfer of a variety of weapons globally, though this web is still incomplete especially with respect to missiles and advanced conventional weapons. The arms trade is regulated only by diverse national export licensing regimes and by constraints that have arisen as a result of scandals, media exposés, and growing public awareness of the continuing flow of their own nation's weaponry into regions of conflict around the world.

This month, the US Congressional Research Service reported that the USA alone sold almost half of all the weapons purchased last year by developing countries, followed by Russia, France, Germany, Britain, and China. The three leading purchasers were the United Arab Emirates, India, and the Republic of Korea -- countries in each of the three most volatile regions on earth. All together, arms sales to developing countries exceeded $36 billion last year, an increase of eight percent. The tragedy of these numbers becomes all the more apparent when we consider that half the world struggles to survive on less than $2 per day.

Whether one looks at the big weapons or the little ones, the facts are alarming. Today -- over a half century after the UN General Assembly adopted its first resolution, which called for the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction -- some 30,000 nuclear weapons reportedly remain in arsenals around the world, many on hair-trigger alert. Multilateral efforts to negotiate agreements on nuclear disarmament and a fissile nuclear materials treaty remain deadlocked at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty -- which outlaws all nuclear tests in all environments -- has still not received the number of ratifications it needs to enter into force. A new phase of the global nuclear arms race -- likely to be accompanied by a missile race and the weaponization of space -- is another risk, now that the future of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty is in jeopardy as a result of the stated intention of the US to withdraw as a party. And multilateral efforts to negotiate a new Protocol to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention broke down just last month.

We should also keep in mind an astounding figure calculated by the Brookings Institution in Washington. The authors of Atomic Audit, found that the total US expenditures on nuclear weapons (plus cleanup costs) were around $5.8 trillion. To help communicate his disarmament message, here is how the project's director described this expenditure: "If we could represent $5.8 trillion as a stack of dollar bills, it would reach from the Earth to the Moon and nearly back again, a distance of more than 459,000 miles."

Small arms present their own chronic problems. There are today an estimated 550 million of
such arms in circulation around the world -- one for every 12 persons on earth. At least 500,000 people are killed each year by small arms and light weapons. This year, the UN held an international conference on all aspects of the illicit trade in such arms. While the very convening of such a conference marked an important milestone in the effort to construct some global norms to regulate this trade, the conference was unable to reach a consensus over issues concerning controls on private ownership and transfers of such weapons to non-state groups. Efforts to regulate this trade have been difficult -- indeed, even the act of gathering basic facts and figures presents formidable challenges. The UN, for example, has for many years maintained a voluntary Register on Conventional Arms, though there is no international consensus to include small arms in that register -- the weapons that are doing most of the killing today in conflicts around the world. Let us also not forget that there are some 300,000 children who are now wielding such weapons as soldiers in many countries.

So what exactly must the world community be doing to address these problems? The greatest challenge is obviously one of consensus-building -- the need to build bridges between peoples rather than to devise new, more insidious ways of destroying them.

Disarmament as a Learning Process

Efforts to bridge the "disarmament divide" are not new -- they have fired the human imagination for centuries. One of the first ventures in this field was the negotiation of a treaty between Rome and Carthage in 201 BC that outlawed the use of war elephants. In my region, the great Emperor Ashoka's revulsion over the carnage of the Kalinga war led to his conversion to Buddhism and the good governance of his famous edicts. We are dealing here with a very old human goal indeed.

Though many of the most difficult disarmament goals have not yet been achieved, everybody who has grappled with this problem has come to recognize the vital importance of public understanding in making new progress. This recognition has grown largely out of a learning process, one that might best be illustrated by the results of some noble but unsuccessful postwar disarmament initiatives.

In 1946, for example, the United States put forward the "Baruch Plan" -- a far-sighted, but unsuccessful proposal to address the global nuclear threat by establishing international ownership and control over all facilities and materials needed to make nuclear weapons. In 1955 at Geneva, the world narrowly missed another chance at a sweeping international disarmament agreement that had been carefully negotiated by the great powers. In 1961, the United States and the Soviet Union jointly submitted a sweeping, but also unsuccessful plan for general and complete disarmament known as the "McCloy-Zorin Agreed Principles." What was notably missing from all these plans was a strategy to win and sustain popular support.
In 1978, however, the General Assembly held its first Special Session devoted exclusively to disarmament, a gathering that finally and explicitly recognized the importance of public understanding and support, as well as the need for governments to promote such goals. In the "Declaration" of the Final Document of that conference, the participants stressed that:

> It is essential that not only Governments but also the peoples of the world recognize and understand the dangers in the present situation. In order that an international conscience may develop and that world public opinion may exercise a positive influence, the United Nations should increase the dissemination of information on the armaments race and disarmament with the full co-operation of Member States.

Communicating Disarmament Today

As is often the case in disarmament affairs, however, the deeds of governments often fall somewhat short of their noble words. In his last report to the General Assembly on the UN's Disarmament Information Programme, for example, the Secretary-General observed that the "lack of resources" has hampered the ability of the UN to communicate its disarmament message. The resources issue is not trivial in the Department of Disarmament Affairs -- the UN's smallest department -- whose annual budget is far less than what the UN spends on cleaning services, and half the cost of one fighter plane.

Yet this small department -- newly re-established by the Secretary-General in 1998 from its previous existence as a Centre -- has nevertheless devoted considerable effort to communicating the disarmament message throughout the world. This is not a departmental message, but a message representing agreements reached by UN Member States through numerous resolutions and treaties that have been adopted and have entered into force over several decades.

The message is quite clear: disarmament is not just good for world peace and prosperity, but is increasingly crucial to the achievement of these goals, particularly with respect to the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction. Disarmament, in short, is both a sensible approach to enhance national security -- it alleviates weapons threats better than the available alternatives of deterrence or defensive measures -- and it offers an ideal that all people can embrace, since it is premised on the abhorrence of indiscriminate slaughter of civilian populations and destruction of property with long-term economic and environmental repercussions.

While the ultimate focal point of this communication is the general public, the UN's Disarmament Information Programme is paying particular attention to certain key constituencies within the public, selected because of their important role in mobilizing public support among wider audiences. Because of the potential costs of nuclear war, the actual and potential constituencies...
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for nuclear disarmament are particularly broad, though we are also witnessing substantial popular support for controls over the small arms trade and the elimination of landmines. Literally every organized group in society has a real stake in the success of disarmament.

Even inside the United Nations, the Department of Disarmament Affairs has efforts underway to "mainstream disarmament" -- that is, to build bridges between the many offices and departments whose own goals would be advanced through progress on disarmament. A good example of this collaboration was the award-winning film, "Armed to the Teeth" about the global small arms threat, which has now been screened in several countries. This film was the result of collaboration between the Department of Disarmament Affairs and the UN's Department for Public Information. I have also co-authored opinion-editorials with the Administrator of the UN Development Programme and the Under-Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. My department has also collaborated with the the UN Children's Fund -- UNICEF -- in a joint exhibit on children in armed conflict, an exhibit that has also been displayed in many countries.

Last month, we published a 454-page Disarmament Yearbook for the year 2000. This yearbook -- now in its twenty-third year of publication -- is itself a descendant of the "Armaments Yearbook" published for many years by the League of Nations. It gives the public a handy, descriptive summary of all the key activities of the various institutions that comprise the UN's disarmament machinery. This includes the UN Disarmament Commission, the First Committee of the General Assembly, the Conference on Disarmament, the UN Institute for Disarmament Research, the Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters, and the Department of Disarmament Affairs and its three regional centres in Lima, Lome, and Kathmandu. The text also includes summaries of important developments relating to key disarmament treaties, including review conferences on existing accords, and progress and setbacks on deliberations concerning the negotiation of new treaties.

In addition to my own speeches and articles on disarmament subjects, our Department also publishes posters, pamphlets and other reading materials designed to communicate the disarmament message. We have entered the digital age and maintain an excellent web site that is filled with useful information about the status of disarmament treaties, official UN statements and documents, ongoing activities of the Department, and various databases concerning UN disarmament resolutions, the status of the mine-ban convention, and the UN's Register of Conventional Arms -- a storehouse of information about international trade in seven categories of major conventional weapons along with additional data on military holdings and national production. We publish a newsletter and issue a series of "Occasional Papers" based on departmental symposia we organize on key disarmament topics involving outside experts. This material is available free of charge and without subscriptions to anybody on earth with access to the internet. Much of it is also available in many of the UN's official languages.

The Department also works very closely with non-governmental groups (NGOs) in communicating the disarmament message to wider publics. We have been particularly
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successful in assisting such groups to participate in the periodic preparatory committee meetings and review conferences of the NPT and, most recently, the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects. Though more progress is needed in this area -- particularly in assisting the growth of a strong NGO representation from developing countries -- we deeply appreciate the important role that such groups play in promoting public support and understanding of the entire ensemble of global disarmament efforts.

We are now giving special attention to the importance of disarmament and non-proliferation education and training at the primary, secondary, university and postgraduate levels. Last November, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution requesting the Secretary-General to prepare, with the assistance of a group of governmental experts, a study on disarmament and non-proliferation education. This resolution followed an earlier recommendation by the Secretary-General's 20-member Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters. While the Group of Experts will not report their findings until next year, we are already learning much about the vital role of education in promoting public support and understanding for disarmament efforts both now and over the years to come.

The Department also acknowledges the need to reach out to the entertainment industry for support of the cause of disarmament. The international film star, Michael Douglas, is a UN Messenger of Peace and he has traveled far and wide to speak to audiences ranging from the UK House of Commons to villages in Albania on behalf of disarmament initiatives. The UN has also screened the recent American film about the Cuban Missile Crisis -- "Thirteen Days" -- which is now being shown to students and general audiences worldwide and it has surely opened people's eyes about the harsh realities of the threat of nuclear war.

Problems in Communicating the Disarmament Message

Clearly, there is no one-size-fits all method for packaging and communicating the disarmament message. Different people will respond differently to different arguments on behalf of disarmament initiatives. Some people respond to fear -- if they see their current security based on the retention of weapons of mass destruction, they will only agree to relinquish those weapons if they can be assured that such an act would not increase their vulnerability to external threats. Similarly, some people believe that the horrors of wars involving the actual use of such weapons -- including the full human, economic, and environmental costs of such weapons -- are so overwhelming that such arguments are sufficient to lead them to support disarmament.

Other people respond to reason or to arguments assessing the material costs and benefits of alternative national security strategies. They must be convinced of the practicality of reliably achieving disarmament goals and they place great emphasis on the need for strong systems to ensure compliance with such agreements. They must also learn the fallacies of deterrence, the idea that the best way to avoid the worst imaginable types of war is to be able to wage such a
war in response to an attack.

Our Departmental efforts in Albania are particularly interesting, since they involve a pilot project to collect weaponry in exchange for much-needed development assistance. Here the "disarmament message" is inextricably tied to economic development -- another long-standing theme of the UN's disarmament efforts that we are now trying to put into practice on a wider basis in other countries, especially in Africa.

We know the arguments on behalf of disarmament are particularly strong when they can appeal both to the hearts and minds of the mass public -- these are the same faculties of pathos and logos that communicators since Aristotle have used with great effect in many human endeavours. Yet finding the right ways of striking this balance using the various media of communications is a difficult challenge indeed. It is exactly the type of challenge that this Centre is amply equipped to address and I would strongly encourage you to look into this matter as you start your second decade.

You will, to be sure, face many obstacles in your work. You will have to take some rather imponderable abstractions -- like "mutual assured destruction" and "theatre missile defence" -- and make them intelligible to the whole world. You will encounter some technical jargon so dense that light itself cannot penetrate it and acronyms that only a glossary will unravel. You will find other roadblocks at every stage in your research, such as state secrecy. We can still only guess the exact number of nuclear weapons there are in the world. And because States do not divulge the numbers of nuclear weapons they possess, there is no official international "registry" of such arms. To learn the facts, you will have to do what the UN does: namely, piece this material together from the enterprising work of non-governmental groups like SIPRI, the Natural Resources Defense Council in the USA, and other such groups. You will find rough estimates of the amount of the stocks of weapons-usable nuclear materials in bomb programmes around the world, but there are no precise official figures. You will find that many weapons research and development projects are shrouded in multiple layers of secrecy. You will hear solemn official statements on weapons projects that you strongly suspect are simply untrue. Even fundamental data on export licensing -- particularly concerning exports of so-called "dual-use" goods that have both military and civilian uses -- are often excluded from public scrutiny by many countries.

Yet these numerous hindrances to public enlightenment and action are best viewed as challenges, not insurmountable obstacles. Jody Williams -- an enterprising American citizen who understood the power of the internet -- was able to light a spark that turned into the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, an effort that culminated in the negotiation of a major international treaty. She understood, as many others are now learning, the power of networks. The UN Development Programme's latest Human Development Report -- entitled "Making New Technologies Work for Human Development"-- has concluded that "The ultimate significance of the network age is that it can empower people by enabling them to use and contribute to the world 's collective knowledge. And the great challenge of the new century is to ensure that the entire human race is so empowered -not just a lucky few."
The Network Age: A Double-Edged Sword

Information and communication play a profoundly important, though very complex, role in shaping the pursuit of disarmament goals. Information, for example, can provide the grounds for creating a disarmament agreement. Here, agreed facts about certain weapons threats -- and the benefits to be gained from eliminating the physical sources of those threats -- provide a foundation upon which an agreement can rest. Such information enables political leaders and their citizens to understand how their interests would be served by the collective abandonment of such weaponry.

Information can also be used to promote the implementation of a disarmament agreement. Peace pact negotiators, arms controllers, and disarmament specialists have known for years that close communication is the glue that strengthens such agreements. Understandings that include inspections, sharing of information, the creation of "hot-lines," advance notification of certain kinds of military activities, and other such initiatives are known as "confidence-building measures." In effect, these amount to various forms of communication tools intended to strengthen the mutual trust needed to implement the agreements. Perceptions of mutual good will are absolutely critical to the success of all disarmament initiatives -- initiatives that some people may support on blind faith, but that most people would insist upon verifying.

In terms of the flow of information, what matters most in bridging the disarmament divide are the purposes to which the new waves of information that cross this bridge are put to use. Such uses will surely be shaped by the political will of local and national leaders and, ultimately, the will of the public at large. The most serious agreements are typically treaties, which are serious not only because they are legally binding, but because they are formally subject to a ratification process usually involving the people's assemblies. Though disarmament and arms control objectives can at times be pursued without treaties, the treaty-making process -- precisely because it involves the legislatures -- is vital in ensuring that the respective agreements are understood and supported by the public, through their legislative representatives.

Hence in any discussion about the making of disarmament agreements, we find ourselves quickly back with the sentiments of the people. Despite the profound effect that globalization has had upon the nation-state system, to a surprising extent all politics very much remains local politics -- especially politics associated with the difficult challenge of eliminating all of the world's nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, or what we call in the trade, "weapons of mass destruction." Though the elimination of these weapons is a formal goal of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Biological Weapons Convention, it is to a surprising extent not the diplomats but their fellow citizens who will ultimately determine whether this great goal is ever achieved.
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The future of disarmament will not be shaped merely by the dissemination of information nor by the deepening of international interdependence -- these are necessary, but by no means sufficient conditions for the success of disarmament on a global scale. We are all now well accustomed to the familiar recitation of statistics about the onward march of globalization -- the ever-growing flows of people, commodities, money, and information across national borders. Yet a closely-knit world can also be quite a dangerous place. The world has been struggling with interdependence for quite a while -- the term was popular well before World War I -- and has learned the hard way that interdependence per se offers no guarantee of world peace.

We should focus, therefore, less on quantitative data on flows or this or that across borders, and more on the qualitative effects of this information, once transmitted, and who is receiving it. We must also pay closer attention to the message -- that is, the substance of the information that is crossing these borders and ensure its intelligibility to all who receive it. We must recognize, cautiously, that our present communications age is dominated by the consumer's insatiable taste for snappy "sound-bites." It is true that easy, fast, and cheap access to information can promote public understanding, mutual respect, economic development, and many other important goals -- but it can also sow the seeds of global catastrophies.

Too often the thirst for quick facts outpaces society's appetite for wisdom. Information can be used as an effective weapon by state officials (what we recognize as propaganda), by their generals (what is called "information warfare"), and by militant groups (what some call "cyberterrorism"). Information on how to manufacture weapons of mass destruction, how to conduct terrorist attacks, and how to evade national and international weapons bans are all examples of exceptions to the rule that world peace is simply a function of the free flow of information. One can therefore count among the beneficiaries of information both civil and uncivil societies.

Conclusion

I have spoken at some length now and would like to conclude by expressing my thanks for this opportunity for me to communicate my own disarmament message to you. I am told that the name "Matilda" in your great national song derived from a term meaning, "Mighty Battle Maiden." Having demonstrated its competence on some of the most famous battlefields of history, Australia now faces one of the greatest battles of all -- the fight for a new basis of international peace and security, one founded not on the threat of mutual annihilation, but on mutual respect and understanding. Few initiatives would advance this goal more than global reduction in military expenditure, new constraints on the arms trade, the final elimination of the last weapon of mass destruction.

Let us work together to bring this dream down to earth. Let us together communicate this message for all the world to hear. Let us, as the motto of Macquarie University so wisely
counsels, "gladly teche." Even the Arms of this university is a source of inspiration, for it prominently features a lighthouse: what better symbol could there be for this university's potential contribution in guiding the world away from the perilous reefs of a global arms race?

Please accept my congratulations on this important milestone in your Centre's history and my very best wishes for many fruitful years to come. As you chart your course for the decades ahead, I can do no better than to quote for you the translated lines from Antonio Machado's poem, "Caminante":

Walker your footprints
are the path; nothing else is.
Walker, there is no path
The path is made in the walking.
When walking we make the path
and looking back
We only see the path
We will never walk again.

Thank you for your patience in listening to this long communication.