Assembly Talk of New Era Followed by “Business As Usual”

by Jayantha Dhanapala

The opening debate in the General Assembly’s First Committee, in which 90 national statements stressed that the business of disarmament after 11 September could never be as it was before, raised expectations of a new coalition for action among delegations. In fact, among the welter of 44 resolutions (one of them subsequently overturned at the General Assembly plenary) and 6 decisions adopted – 21 of them by recorded vote as in 2000 – the same concerns and the same divisions recurred.

There were some exceptions. Chairman André Erdos of Hungary, whose opening statement had pleaded for a First Committee with a difference, did set an example by proposing a resolution on “Multilateral cooperation in the area of disarmament and nonproliferation and global efforts against terrorism” which was eventually adopted without a vote. The hard earned consensus achieved at the July 2001 Conference on Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects was preserved in a resolution cosponsored by 90 delegations and adopted without a vote. The significance of this being the first General Assembly session after the election of President Bush was muted by the international solidarity achieved as a reaction to the events of 11 September.

The First Committee completed its work well ahead of other General Assembly Committees and three days ahead of its own schedule. That efficient use of UN resources is of course praiseworthy. Greater efficiency might be demonstrated in the future by the application of sunset provisions to outdated, repetitive and redundant resolutions. Another general conclusion to be drawn is the vital need for closer consultations among delegations in preparation for the First Committee so that draft resolutions reflect the views of as many delegations as possible.

The New Agenda Coalition (NAC) countries – Brazil, Egypt, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa and Sweden – announced early in the proceedings that they would not present a resolution at this year’s First Committee on ways to achieve a nuclear-weapon-free world. Instead, they confined themselves to reading out the communiqué from their Foreign Ministers’ meeting opting to focus on the preparatory process for the 2005 NPT Review Conference, which begins in April 2002.

Last year’s NAC resolution, based on the NAC negotiated consensus language from the 2000 NPT Review Conference, succeeded in garnering 146 votes in favor including those of the United States, United Kingdom and China. Opinion was divided on the wisdom of this cautious strategy and of putting all the NAC eggs in the NPT basket.

Mexican Initiative. The Mexican-sponsored draft resolutions on sub-strategic or tactical nuclear weapons and on the “UN Conference to consider ways of eliminating nuclear dangers in the context of nuclear disarmament” ran into difficulties because of a wide divergence of views. As a result the text on tactical nuclear weapons was withdrawn while the draft resolution on the
UN Conference proposal, despite its origins in the Assembly’s summit-level Millennium Declaration, had to be converted into a procedural decision that merely placed the item on the agenda of the 57th session of the General Assembly; it was finally adopted with 115 votes in favor, 7 against and 37 abstaining.

**Nuclear Issues.** In the area of nuclear disarmament, absent the NAC initiative, attention was focused on the ABM resolution cosponsored by the Russian Federation, China and Belarus, the Japan-sponsored text on “A path to the total elimination of nuclear weapons” and on the CTBT resolution. The ABM resolution, despite a revision to reflect ongoing bilateral US-Russian discussions, did marginally better than in 2000 with 63 delegations abstaining, possibly in anticipation of what might emerge from the Bush-Putin Summit at Crawford, held after the vote.

**Japanese Resolution.** The Japanese resolution, with changes to strengthen the text and revisions to accommodate the concerns of its allies, fared less well than in 2000. The CTBT decision (mindful of the Conference to Facilitate Entry into Force rescheduled from 11 to 13 November), asked only that the item be placed on the agenda of the next Assembly session. It was a harsh reminder of the uncompromising Bush Administration policy towards this treaty when the US voted alone and against this decision with 140 for and no abstentions.

**Depleted Uranium.** Iraq surprised the First Committee with a controversial draft resolution on depleted uranium, which was narrowly adopted in the First Committee and later narrowly defeated in the plenary of the General Assembly.

**Small Arms.** The number of resolutions on small arms was reduced this year, and Colombia, Japan and South Africa cosponsored the resolution reflecting the consensus achieved at the July 2001 Conference despite some murmurs about the unavoidable “program budget implications” of holding a conference in 2006, biennial meetings beginning in 2003 and convening an experts group on the meeting of small arms in 2002.

**Information Security.** Another study group by experts was called for by the resolution sponsored by the Russian Federation on threats to Information Security, which could encompass cyber terrorism.

**General Observations.** A number of additional general observations can be made. Fewer delegations participated in the voting this year than in 2000; India, Israel and Pakistan tended to vote together on nuclear issues; abstentions on some resolutions were quite large in relation to those in favor.

In the final analysis, while 11 September dominated the new thinking of First Committee delegations, their actions remained steeped in old paradigms. With the inconclusive outcome of the Crawford Summit and the current trend towards a la carte multilateralism and disarmament by handshake in preference to disarmament by treaties, we have certainly not received a fresh impetus for the Conference on Disarmament to begin negotiations. Nor have we advanced in the universalization and implementation of existing treaties. The norm building processes in small arms and light weapons and in missiles; UN transparency measures like the Conventional
Arms Register; and multilateral cooperation in regional disarmament continued to receive support from delegations strengthening the role of the UN in multilateral disarmament.

It is time, however, that we move from selective à la carte multilateralism to addressing the entire menu of disarmament. That can only be done at the broadest possible international level in a fourth special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament (SSOD IV).

*Jayantha Dhanapala is United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs*