The Challenge of Sustaining Progress on Global Nuclear Disarmament

By

Sergio Duarte
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs
United Nations

2011 World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs
A Nuclear-Weapon-Free, Peaceful, and Just World

Nagasaki, Japan
7 August 2011
I am deeply grateful for this honour to visit Nagasaki and for my second opportunity to address the World Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs. I wish to thank the organizers of this event, especially Mr. Hiroshi Taka who invited me, and to commend all of you here today for showing your own personal interest in this historic but still very timely subject.

Because this is the 56th annual conference in this longstanding series, I thought it would be appropriate for me to discuss a subject that everybody who works at the United Nations must address at one time or another. This is the challenge of sustaining public support for goals that are truly global in scope. These are challenges that are well beyond the capability of any one Member State to meet alone—and that citizens often feel powerless to influence.

Some people have called them “global public goods”, which are commodities, services, or conditions that are vitally important to all countries, but not owned or fully controlled by any of them. They are often taken for granted, yet much lamented when they cease to exist. Maintaining a clean environment, for example, or ending the illicit trafficking in guns or drugs, or implementing high safety standards for international transportation, or establishing global norms for communication, public health, and nuclear safety—these are intended to benefit all people, everywhere.

I am mentioning this now because Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called nuclear disarmament “a global public good of the highest order.” It was his strong personal support for progress in this field that inspired him to make his historic journeys to Hiroshima and to this city of Nagasaki last year, to honour the memory of those who perished in both cities due to the atomic bombings, to pay his respects to the hibakusha, and to remind the world of the important work that remains ahead in achieving nuclear disarmament. A similar desire to address nuclear safety and environmental challenges led him today (7 August) to visit Fukushima, and also inspired him earlier to visit the former nuclear test site at Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan, and the site of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in Ukraine.

He has made nuclear disarmament one of highest priorities as Secretary-General because he understands that it will never be achieved without persistent efforts by the entire world community. He knows that failure to achieve it will have horrible consequences for many other goals that are valued highly by all people—goals that are deeply rooted in the UN Charter. I hardly need to remind an audience here in Nagasaki that even a single use of a nuclear weapon, either wilfully or by accident, would have profoundly devastating consequences not only for its specific target, but for international peace and security over all. Such weapons are dangerous and destabilizing, even when they are not used.

The continued production, stockpiling, transportation, and modernization of nuclear arsenals are not isolated events that take place in single countries. Quite the contrary—they have their own effects well beyond national borders. An American writer, Robert Louis Stevenson, once wrote that “Everybody, soon or late, sits down to a banquet of consequences.” Nowhere is this truer than with respect to nuclear weapons. We are living with such consequences today.

Such weapons serve to deepen mutual suspicions and mistrust among nations. History has clearly shown how their existence in some States has served to inspire their acquisition by other
States. And once such weapons are acquired, they are then continually being improved, which only inspires more mutual suspicions and mistrust, leading to further improvements or proliferation by other States. If some countries view nuclear weapons as the ultimate guarantee of national security or the very backbone of a security alliance, one should not be surprised to find other countries reaching a decision that they too must obtain such security—or at least to acquire the capability to make such weapons. If some States are believed to have some additional status or prestige through possession of such weapons, surely other States will seek to improve their own standing by similar means. And as the bombs spread, so does their familiar doctrine of nuclear deterrence, which the Secretary-General has called “contagious”.

Another consequence relates to the economic cost of these weapons. One study once estimated that the total historic costs of nuclear weapons in the United States alone was over $5.6 trillion—that is enough to make a stack of dollar bills rising to the moon and almost all the way back. That estimate was published over a decade ago, and only addressed one State. The total global cost of nuclear weapons is literally astronomical—there is no other way to describe it—while modernization costs continue to skyrocket.

This is what I meant by the “banquet of consequences” produced by nuclear weapons, and nuclear disarmament is the only appropriate and effective response—a fact that has long been recognized throughout the world community. How long? The elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons adaptable to mass destruction was a goal included in the first resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on 24 January 1946. This goal has been associated with the United Nations for so long that it has become part of its identity—what the UN organization stands for.

Disarmament has widespread support not just because people view nuclear weapons as morally objectionable, but also because they understand that there are concrete security benefits from abolition. In May last year, for example, the States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) concluded their Review Conference by adopting by consensus a Final Document stating that the Conference “reaffirms and recognizes that the total elimination of nuclear weapons is the only absolute guarantee against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons”. They adopted similar language at the 2000 NPT Review Conference, which was also underscored in General Assembly Resolution 65/56 last December. In other words, the nuclear weapons that are least likely to be used—are those that do not exist.

This is a remarkable position, because it means that any other means to prevent the use or threat of use are not as effective—not deterrence, not the balance of power, not endless rising military expenditures, not pre-emptive wars, not the pursuit of perfect non-proliferation policies, not missile defence, and not export controls. This statement is extraordinary in another sense as well—it shows that the advocates of disarmament, far from being naïve utopian idealists, have actually been the ones with the most realistic appreciation of the effects of these weapons and the ones with the most effective response to their threats: global nuclear disarmament.

Yet the weapons continue to exist, along with all their various claims about providing the ideal defence, enhancing national prestige, and promoting international peace and security.

There are many possible responses that have the potential to revitalize global nuclear disarmament efforts, but all of them essentially rely upon one basic ingredient—a troubled public conscience. And the greatest enemy of disarmament is public complacency. Let me explain.

A troubled public conscience means that individual citizens—everywhere—recognize that nuclear weapons are not a legacy they wish to pass onto future generations. The more people are informed about the costs and indiscriminate effects of nuclear weapons, and how citizens themselves are their ultimate target, the more they can appreciate the need to pursue forms of security that do not involve the use or threat of use of such weapons.

So, it follows that the physical, economic, and humanitarian effects of nuclear weapons must be fully understood by the public, and this explains why disarmament groups in civil society have devoted so much time and effort to describing such effects. Without question, there could be no better spokespersons for these effects than the hibakusha, who can speak with far more authority about such human effects than even the smartest scientists.

Efforts to spread the word of the hibakusha are therefore extremely important, and this is why the Secretary-General proposed last year that their testimonies should be translated into many different languages so that the entire world can learn from their experiences. I am pleased that efforts are underway to accomplish precisely this result.

All of you here today are doing exactly what you should be doing. You are participating in marches and rallies. You are signing petitions. You are sharing your views using television, radio, newspapers, and the electronic social media. You are encouraging your friends to get involved. You are organizing seminars and workshops on disarmament. You are joining groups of people who share your concerns and visions for a better future. In these various ways, you are making your voices heard in your society and throughout the world.

These are all important in communicating not only the right goal to pursue, but the relevance of each individual human being in achieving that goal. Everybody has a contribution to make in this great cause, and people working together can indeed make a big difference.

Efforts by civil society had an enormously important role to play in halting and outlawing all atmospheric nuclear tests. They played a huge role in encouraging the Russian Federation and the United States to conclude a treaty outlawing intermediate-range nuclear missiles. They contributed significantly to the conclusion of the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Mine Ban Convention, and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, while also successfully urging States to strengthen controls over the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons.

One of the most encouraging developments in recent years has been the broadening of support for nuclear disarmament among diverse groups in society. A good example of this is the Mayors for Peace initiative launched by the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which has now gained the support from representatives of almost 5,000 cities worldwide. This is quite significant, given the fact that if nuclear weapons are ever used again they will most likely be used on cities—and recognizing also that over one half of the world’s population now lives in cities. Women’s groups
have been actively working for nuclear disarmament over many decades. Environmentalists, human rights activists, scientists, scholars, religious leaders, parliamentarians, engineers, lawyers, doctors, retired military officials, and former government leaders have all joined this great cause. It is the sheer diversity of this coalition for disarmament that gives me the greatest hope for sustaining progress in this field over the years ahead.

As more and more people become involved, representing increasingly diverse interests, we are witnessing an extraordinary new phenomenon in the world today—decisions about nuclear weapons are not exclusively the concern of a few elites in powerful countries, but a concern of all States, and all the peoples of the United Nations. Yes, democracy is coming to disarmament—people are not only raising their voices, they are challenging the fundamental boundaries of legitimate debate over nuclear weapons policy.

We are witnessing what might be called a “revolution of rising expectations” for progress in disarmament, and States are responding in many ways to these demands. The Government of Japan has always been a world leader on behalf of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, as seen in—its annual resolutions in the General Assembly on nuclear disarmament; its role in organizing the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (the Evans/Kawaguchi Commission); its recent efforts in launching the 10-nation Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative; its longstanding support for the work of the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific; and its active role in promoting disarmament and non-proliferation education worldwide.

Last June, the five recognized nuclear-weapon States met in Paris to discuss how they would work together “in pursuit of their shared goal of nuclear disarmament under article VI of the NPT”, and to implement their other responsibilities under the agreed 64-point Action Plan adopted at the 2010 NPT Review Conference.2 Earlier, on 24 September 2009, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1887, which called upon all States—not just those that are parties to the NPT—“to undertake to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to nuclear arms reduction and disarmament”.

Together, your civil society initiatives, plus these commitments and initiatives launched by States, are creating a new dynamic—what your great artist Hokusai might call a Great Wave—of public expectations for new progress in nuclear disarmament. You have shown through your actions how to sustain disarmament in a very complex and troubled world, one filled with many other priorities. And you must not despair or give up just because the process might not be as rapid as you would like, or because some difficult obstacles remain to be overcome.

I would therefore like to conclude not by counselling you on what you already know you must do. I will conclude instead by humbly thanking you for all you have already done, and for the courage and vision you share in confronting the new challenges that lie ahead.

---