Statement to the First Committee of the General Assembly

By

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Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

I welcome this opportunity to address the Committee and am especially pleased to welcome those members of delegations who are joining us for the first time. It is also my honour to congratulate you, Mr. Chairman, on your appointment to guide our work. I wish to recognize as well the distinguished members of the Bureau and to assure them of the fullest cooperation of the Office for Disarmament Affairs throughout the work of the Committee.

By any measure, this Committee has on its agenda some of the most difficult challenges for international peace and security. Its deliberations will cover the world’s deadliest weapons of mass destruction, including the most indiscriminate of all, nuclear weapons. It will address issues relating to the regulation and limitation of conventional arms. And it will take up other subjects that have profound implications for our common future—including space weapons, the relationship between disarmament and development, disarmament education, regional cooperation, and issues relating to institutions in the United Nations disarmament machinery.

We are all familiar with the extent that progress in disarmament depends on its broader political climate. Some have argued that this political climate alone determines both the rate of progress and its future prospects. There is some truth in this, but opinions differ over which trends are producing which results, and many are not convinced that the environment determines disarmament outcomes, and not the other way around.

Some claim, for example, that if there is no peace or stability, if armed conflicts continue, if regional disputes remain unresolved, and if risks of weapons proliferation or terrorism persist—then under such circumstances, there can be no disarmament.

If this argument were true, one might conclude that this Committee would be well advised to adjourn today, because all our work would be held hostage to developments occurring outside the walls of this chamber. Our role would amount to little more than to echo those trends.

Yet there is another view of the role of this Committee that I believe has been more widely accepted over its last sixty-five years. This view holds that the Committee has the capability to make its own independent contribution to advancing multilateral norms in disarmament and, thereby, to strengthening international peace and security. This Committee did not halt its work even during the darkest years of the Cold War, when nuclear arsenals were growing and threats of nuclear war were not uncommon and widely recognized as such—so much so, they became the subject of popular novels and films.

Let us recall that most of the multilateral treaties that currently exist were negotiated during a geopolitical era marked by arms races, regional wars, and an intense multidimensional rivalry between the world’s two great Superpowers. How could this have been possible if progress in disarmament had first to satisfy the preconditions of world peace and stability?
Today, we are fortunate to be conducting our deliberations in a substantially improved political climate. The Cold War has now been over for an entire generation. While over 20,000 nuclear weapons remain—and their operational status is unclear—the size of those arsenals has fallen considerably since their estimated peak of over 70,000 around 1986. More impressively, popular attitudes towards such weapons have also been changing in recent decades. In particular, the humanitarian consequences of the use of these weapons have been receiving greater recognition—as reflected in the 1996 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice, in statements and work of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and most recently in language adopted by consensus in the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

Equally impressive has been the increasing variety of actors who are working around the world for global nuclear disarmament, and this includes an active role by the Secretary-General, who last year became the first Secretary-General to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Last March, I was proud to join him in opening a new display at the UN’s Disarmament Exhibit showing twin stacks of a petition for a nuclear weapons convention—that petition had over a million signatures collected by Mayors for Peace, an organization representing over 5000 cities in 151 countries. Another international petition, also in support of such a convention, was presented by the Japanese group Gensuikyo at the NPT Review Conference—and it had over 7 million signatures.

In addition to city mayors and grass-roots organizations, national parliamentarians have also been taking an increased interest in promoting progress in nuclear disarmament. In April 2009, the Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union—representing 600 parliamentarians from over 100 countries—adopted a resolution that also supported negotiation of a nuclear weapons convention, as originally proposed by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on 24 October 2008.

And in September 2009, the UN Security Council—after decades of not addressing this issue—held a summit meeting that produced Resolution 1887, which called upon all States, not just the parties to the NPT, to enter into good faith negotiations on nuclear disarmament.

As we consider these facts—while recognizing the uncertainties of the future—it is possible to observe two reinforcing trends that could positively influence the work of this Committee both this year and in the years ahead. The first is the trend associated with the democratic revolution now sweeping the world, not just the Middle East. Evidence that democracy is coming to disarmament is indisputable in the actions I have just cited by the mayors, parliamentarians, and civil society groups throughout the world. It is apparent in the persisting and growing expectations voiced in the General Assembly for new progress in disarmament—and as the world’s largest democratic body, the General Assembly offers a forum for each State, large or small, to participate in the process of developing multilateral disarmament norms.

And as democracy is coming to disarmament, so too is the rule of law. This is apparent in the persisting efforts to gain universal membership in the key multilateral treaties dealing with weapons of mass destruction—the BWC, CWC, and NPT. It is apparent in strong and I believe growing interest in support of negotiating a nuclear weapons convention, or at least for serious consideration of what types of legal obligations would be necessary to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons. It is apparent in recent meetings by the nuclear-weapon States to consult on ways to improve transparency of their nuclear arsenals and stocks of fissile materials, a longstanding goal of the world
community. It is apparent in the importance the entire world attaches to full compliance with disarmament and non-proliferation commitments. It is apparent in preparations to convene a conference next year to conclude an arms trade treaty, and in other efforts to prevent an arms race in outer space, to agree on norms governing missiles and missile defences, and to strengthen international legal obligations in the field of non-proliferation and against terrorism involving weapons of mass destruction. And it is apparent in efforts that have been underway since the 2010 NPT Review Conference to pursue the establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East—and such efforts will hopefully produce progress quite soon.

These twin forces of democracy and the rule of law also have the potential to help in achieving another longstanding goal—namely, a reduction in military spending, or in the words of Article 26 of the Charter, “the least diversion for armaments of the world’s human and economic resources.” At present the world is reportedly spending over $1.6 trillion a year for military purposes, while progress in achieving many of the great Millennium Development Goals has fallen short of expectations given the lack of resources.

In terms of the work of this Committee, it is therefore quite clear that we should not close up shop and wait for the dawning of world peace as a precondition for disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control to succeed. To the contrary, our efforts in each of these fields make their own vital and independent contributions in strengthening international peace and security. And as disarmament advances, the world advances.

Our efforts offer prospects for reducing mistrust in the world. Arms reductions can help not only in reducing regional tensions, but in eliminating the likelihood of large-scale armed conflicts. Far from affirming the legality or utility of nuclear weapons for national or collective self-defence, nuclear disarmament efforts satisfy both the law and the will of the people, while also enhancing security far more reliably than a precarious balance of nuclear terror.

For all these reasons, disarmament remains a goal shared by all Member States. What is most needed now is the political will to translate these goals into action. For this work to be undertaken on a global scale there is no substitute for the UN disarmament machinery as a venue for multilateral cooperation. It remains the world’s great “assembly line” for the construction and maintenance of global disarmament norms. As the forces of democracy continue to grow, so too will the legitimacy of international rules in this field—and as the rule of law continues to come to disarmament, so too will the world welcome the additional stability, predictability, and basic fairness that will arise as a result.

In short, democracy and the rule of law are two powerful forces in the global environment that together can help strengthen the political will needed to move the disarmament agenda forward.

For all these reasons, I wish to extend to all delegations my best wishes for a very successful session. The UN disarmament machinery needs some new success stories—and the First Committee would be a good place to start.