United Nations Disarmament Commission

Opening Remarks

By

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I am honoured to address the Disarmament Commission as it opens its 2012 substantive session and wish to commend its departing Chairman, Ambassador Hamid Al Bayati, for his competent stewardship of the work of this Commission, and to recognize with appreciation the many efforts of his Bureau. I also wish to congratulate Ambassador Enrique Román-Morey on his election as the Chairman of the 2012 session. The Office for Disarmament Affairs stands ready to assist the Chairman, the Bureau, and all delegations throughout this session.

Because this is my first opportunity to address you in my capacity as High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, I would like to say just a few words of a personal nature, while paying tribute to my distinguished predecessor, Sergio Duarte, who has worked so tirelessly and with such dedication to further our goals in the field of disarmament.

I first began working in the UN Secretariat some 30+ years ago, and later joined the Department for Disarmament Affairs in the 1980s when I had the privilege of working on the World Disarmament Campaign. I have since learned that while you can take the person out of disarmament, you cannot take disarmament out of the person. There is a good reason for this—the fate of humanity very much depends on progress in this field.

While progress has been limited over these years in disarmament—especially nuclear disarmament—the international community has a history of overcoming disappointments in this field, which offers us something on which to build. Let us consider the following.

When I started my career at the UN, four of the world’s five nuclear-weapon-free zones had not yet been established. There was no Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological Weapons Convention had less than half its 163 parties today. There was no Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. No indefinite extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. No START, no Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, and no New START treaties. No Mine Ban Convention. No Convention on Cluster Munitions. No Inhumane Weapons Convention. No Programme of Action on Small Arms. No General Assembly Special Sessions on Disarmament. No Security Council summits addressing nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation issues. No detailed proposal by a Secretary-General for achieving global nuclear disarmament. And several major regional conventional arms treaties around the world had not yet been concluded.

There has been some welcome progress in disarmament and non-proliferation education, where programmes have succeeded in reaching a new generation who—sooner than we all might realize—will have to bear their own responsibilities in these challenging fields. The challenges ahead in this field are to sustain and expand this progress.

As for the UN Disarmament Commission, by 1977 it had rarely met in the previous 18 years. Yet in the 20 years to follow from 1979 to 1999, it was able to adopt by consensus sixteen guidelines, recommendations, and declarations. As we consider the Commission’s inability to achieve a consensus since 1999, we sometimes forget that progress is possible even amid great differences among policies and priorities of our Member States. If such progress was possible during some of the darker days of the Cold War, surely such progress should be possible today.

The Commission continues to play an important role in the overall UN disarmament machinery, primarily through its deliberations on specific issues relating to nuclear weapons and
conventional arms. The guidelines and recommendations adopted by the Commission have the potential to inspire not only future General Assembly resolutions, but can also potentially lay the conceptual foundations for new multilateral treaties. Fulfilling this potential, however, will require the Commission to be much more than a platform for articulating national policies.

When the Commission has made progress, it has done so because its members have recognized how national interests are advanced by the pursuit of common interests. The greatest obstacles to progress in disarmament have long been the lack of trust or confidence in proposed initiatives due to uncertainties or possibly suspicions about their true motivations. The purely deliberative role of the Commission offers one way of breaking down such suspicions. This may well be the greatest contribution the Commission can make in meeting global disarmament challenges.

If fresh thinking and new ideas are needed, the Commission may wish to re-visit past proposals to invite experts to join our deliberations. I note that at the end of its 2008 session, the Commission discussed the Chairman’s proposal on procedural and organizational elements for the possible participation of experts in the work of the Commission—and also decided to continue the consideration of this issue in the future.

The Commission’s 2012 session is occurring in a dynamic political environment. Soon, the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 NPT Review Conference will hold its first session. Soon, negotiations will begin at the United Nations on an arms trade treaty. Soon, States will be reviewing the implementation of the Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons. Soon, preparations will be underway to open a new session of the First Committee of the General Assembly. And by the end of this year, a conference will convene to consider the issue of establishing a zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.

Today we are seeing countless initiatives to promote disarmament and the regulation of armaments, and the Commission definitely has its own contributions to make in these areas. Some positive steps forward by the Disarmament Commission could well help in promoting progress elsewhere in the UN disarmament machinery, by showing that progress is indeed possible.

There is no chance that disarmament will cease to be a priority of an overwhelming majority of Member States and billions of people in civil society around the world. It is an issue Dag Hammarskjold called a “hardy perennial” at the United Nations even in back in 1955, and expectations for progress are high and continuing to grow.

The Commission now has a chance to rise to these expectations. By adopting a new three-year deliberative agenda, it can collectively cast its vote for multilateralism, for disarmament as an essential means to strengthen international peace and security, and for the United Nations as an indispensable common forum for the pursuit of common interests.

For even despite the undeniable progress that has been made in the past three decades, there obviously remains much important work to do. Key treaty regimes still fall short of universal membership. Some tens of thousands of nuclear weapons reportedly still remain, sustained by long-term modernization plans and large budgets. The international rule of law has
been unevenly developed in certain fields, including nuclear weapons, conventional arms, and long-range missiles. Unresolved nuclear weapon proliferation concerns continue to foster instabilities in the Middle East, South Asia, and Northeast Asia.

It is my great hope that today the Commission will start a new phase in its evolution within the UN disarmament machinery—an era in which compromises are possible on means, but not on fundamental principles and ends; an era identified by its high level of multilateral cooperation in addressing common interests; and an era known for the fulfilment of hopes rather than the aggravation of fears. I wish the Chairman and all members of this Commission well in your deliberations and look forward to contributing in any way I can to your success.