INTRODUCTORY REMARKS TO 2012 UN DISARMAMENT FELLOWS

By

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Today I have the pleasure of welcoming all of you—the 2012 class of Disarmament Fellows—to United Nations Headquarters. A lot has happened since my last meeting with you in Vienna during the 2012 IAEA General Conference and I am glad that you are able to observe the activities of the General Assembly as it commences a new session.

I know that you have all learned many things in the past six weeks during your visits to Geneva, Vienna and The Hague, as well as your study trips to Germany, China and Japan.

By now you are surely aware of the respect that this Fellowship Programme has earned throughout the world disarmament community—a community that includes individual Member States and multilateral arenas both inside and outside the United Nations. The Programme is respected because of the importance of the issues it addresses and the quality of the training it provides.

As a result, there is a certain prestige associated with being a Disarmament Fellow. It is not just something nice to put on the resume. It is an honour to be part of this special community of professionals that is grappling with some of the greatest challenges in international peace and security. Quite fittingly, the Programme was commended in the final report of the distinguished International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament.¹

Over the years since its establishment in 1978 by the General Assembly at its first Special Session on disarmament, the Programme has trained over 850 government officials from 163 countries.

This is really an impressive accomplishment, especially considering the contributions of this Fellowship Programme in raising awareness of the importance of disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation issues as national and international priorities. Yet it has achieved even more than this by helping to strengthen the expertise within Member States in these fields.

As High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, I am proud that many of the early participants of the Programme are now holding positions of responsibility in the field of disarmament within their own Governments or in disarmament-related international organizations. I was told that you have met some of these alumni either in your own countries or during previous segments of this year’s Programme.

Looking ahead, I have little doubt many of you will one day also be meeting future participants in this Programme and working with them as friends and colleagues.

During this final segment in New York, you will observe the First Committee in action as it deliberates and adopts over 50 resolutions and decisions. These deliberations include a thorough review of last year’s progress and setbacks, as well as a forward-looking element that has the potential to inject a new dynamic in pursuing future disarmament initiatives.

As you gain first-hand experience witnessing these deliberations, I think it is only appropriate for me to give you a brief overview of the work of the Secretariat’s Office for Disarmament Affairs in the fields of disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation.

We have a rather unique role to play in the wider framework of the UN disarmament machinery—we assist that machinery, yet we are also a part of it.

Let me explain. On 24 January 1946, the General Assembly adopted its first resolution, which established the goal of eliminating atomic weapons and other weapons “adaptable to mass destruction.” So I think I can justifiably say that WMD disarmament is one of the oldest goals of the United Nations. It is almost as old as the Charter itself, which also refers both to disarmament and the regulation of armaments.

You may not know that the Secretariat has had various offices working on disarmament issues for virtually just as long—it is one of the oldest sustained missions in the entire Secretariat. Even as long ago as 1955, then-Secretary-General Hammarskjöld was referring to nuclear disarmament as a “hardy perennial” at the UN. We are now organized as an Office, but over the years we have also been a department, a centre, a group, a section, and a division. In over
six decades, we have been reorganized at least nine times, which I view as
evidence of the importance attached to this issue by each Secretary-General.

Our Office performs many roles in the Secretariat. Working at times with
other parts of the UN system, we handle most administrative issues relating to
disarmament in this organization. This includes issues relating to the management
of official documentation and reports, and the official transmission of information
to Member States or requests seeking their views. We assist in the work of the UN
disarmament machinery, which entails coordinating relations between different
parts of the secretariat and with other international agencies. In addition, we
represent the UN at disarmament conferences, and perform tasks assigned pursuant
to multilateral treaties such as the NPT.

Another function is to provide advice—primarily through the provision of
information and counsel to the Secretary-General, but also through working with
Permanent Missions of the Member States. We undertake research and analysis of
policy issues, publish studies, and monitor worldwide news developments. We
serve an advocacy function in promoting universal membership in relevant treaties
and their full implementation, in working closely with civil society, and in
delivering numerous speeches and lectures on disarmament issues. We also serve
an educational function, which involves implementing a programme for
disarmament and non-proliferation education, organizing training seminars and
workshops, and building ties to academia.

Yes, we do a lot to promote progress in disarmament. Yet the primary
actors in this business remain the Member States—they are the ones who sign
treaties, adopt implementing legislation, and provide funding to support
disarmament activities. One of the great strengths of this Fellowship Programme
that it is specifically intended to be useful to officials in government who have
responsibilities in this field. I like this idea very much of the UN Secretariat
working in partnership with our Member States in advancing disarmament goals.

To conclude, I wish you a fruitful study visit in New York. My colleagues
and I in UNODA will no doubt meet you again someday as you build your own
careers by actively participating in various multilateral disarmament arenas. You
have my very wishes for success in all your work, and my gratitude for your deep
interest in this subject. With your help, we will only be closer to the day when
together we can enjoy the concrete security and economic benefits of disarmament,
rather than just talk about them.