Opening Remarks

By

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58th Session, Geneva
4 – 6 July 2012
Since this is my first opportunity to address the Board, let me begin by expressing my gratitude to your Chairman, Ambassador Palihakkara, for his stewardship of your deliberations this year.

I also wish to thank each Member of this Board for setting aside time from your other important responsibilities to participate in this unique component of the UN disarmament machinery.

This 58th session Board is occurring at a crucial juncture in the history of worldwide disarmament efforts.

As you know, negotiations just commenced at UN Headquarters on an Arms Trade Treaty. In his opening statement to this historic conference, Secretary-General BAN Ki-moon warmly welcomed the commencement of these negotiations, adding that the lack of a multilateral treaty to regulate the conventional arms trade has been a “disgrace” to the world community.

He viewed that event as a step forward in bringing the rule of law to disarmament, a theme that nicely summarizes the overarching items on the agenda of this 58th session of the Advisory Board. These are timely and substantively important issues indeed—the future UN architecture for conventional arms regulation, and follow-up discussions on the revitalization of the Conference on Disarmament.

Progress in each of these issues will indeed help in bringing the rule of law to disarmament, precisely because the United Nations must remain at the center of multilateral disarmament efforts, as mandated in the Charter, in countless resolutions of the General Assembly, and in numerous multilateral treaties.

With respect to conventional arms regulation, the world community has not been able to establish robust legally binding norms governing the development, production, export, or use of such weaponry. Aside from the Inhumane Weapons Convention, the Cluster Munitions Convention, and the Mine Ban Convention, multilateral norms in this field have tended to be of the non-binding variety, as for example, illustrated by the 2001 Programme of Action on Small Arms, or the repeated calls upon States to participate voluntarily in the UN Register of Conventional Arms and the annual UN Report on Military Expenditures.
This is why the ATT negotiations at the UN are so crucial. We are witnessing an event that stands a good chance of bringing the rule of law to the conventional arms control field, a step that would finally match with deeds the words in the Charter relating to the “regulation of armaments.”

Since these negotiations are occurring at the United Nations, it is fitting that some specific thought would be given by this Board on the future UN architecture for conventional arms regulation. I realize it is impossible for the Board to forecast the outcome of these deliberations, but this outcome will surely impact on that UN architecture.

Yet it is not premature to consider the UN architecture. Nor do I think your deliberations conflict in any way with the desire of many States to consider such issues only in the context of a fourth Special Session on Disarmament. The fact remains that the key substantive and procedural issues relating to the regulation of conventional arms are fully global in scope and therefore require close consideration of some global solutions, even in anticipation of a future Special Session. It is for this reason that your advice to the Secretary-General in this area is most deeply welcomed and appreciated.

Historically, the role of the UN in bringing the rule of law to disarmament has focused upon the Conference on Disarmament and its predecessors. These were all entities mandated to negotiate legally-binding multilateral norms for disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation.

The deadlock in the CD has been a matter of considerable concern to the Secretary-General, who has put forward proposals to revitalize it as the world’s single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum. He has personally addressed members of the CD. He has raised this issue in several of his public statements. In September 2010, he convened a High-level Meeting on Revitalizing the Conference on Disarmament and Taking Forward Multilateral Disarmament Negotiations. In July 2011 he participated in the General Assembly’s follow-up meeting to the High-level Meeting.
Because legal norms are indispensable in achieving disarmament, it is essential to explore creatively all possible means to revitalize the CD. I wish to reassure you that the Secretary-General welcomes your advice on how this can be accomplished, including possible contributions by the Secretary-General himself in the years ahead.

While the world community is indeed facing a historic juncture in the disarmament field, so too is this Board facing its own crossroads, given the transition that is underway within the Board as long-serving Members are replaced by new ones. This transition is of course not unique to the Board, as personnel in official responsibilities are often rotated throughout international diplomatic life, including in the UN Secretariat.

Fortunately, the new Members will have the benefit of your past deliberations, which help in pointing the way toward future progress. I hope the new Members will demonstrate their “value added” by identifying innovative diplomatic, political, or practical initiatives for advancing this great cause of disarmament.

To all Members who will be leaving the Board this year, I wish to extend my sincere thanks for your valuable service and for leaving a legacy that will serve as a foundation for new Members to build upon. Let me also say that the staff of the Office of Disarmament Affairs wishes to express its own appreciation for having had the opportunity to work with all Members of this Board. It is this dedicated, stubborn spirit of common cause that will probably do more than any single factor in shaping the future of disarmament. Thank you once again for your service.