The United Nations and Disarmament:
From Noble Goal to Concrete Achievement

By

Angela Kane
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs
United Nations

Delivered by
Jarmo Sareva
Director
Chief of Conference on Disarmament Secretariat
and Conference Support Branch

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Ambassador Tanner, Dean Koser, and Dr. Sidhu, please accept my sincere thanks for the courtesy you have shown in inviting me to participate in this very happy event at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. This Graduation Ceremony marks the conclusion of a training course on one of the world community’s greatest responsibilities—namely, meeting the disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation challenges of our current age.

In his great work, The Outline of History, H. G. Wells wrote that “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.” The weapons threats we face in 2012 are of course far graver than in 1920, when Wells wrote his history.

Some of these relate to threats posed by weapons of mass destruction. Others relate to dangers from the unregulated trade and use of conventional armaments. And amidst a global financial crisis, we are also all aware of the opportunity costs for social and economic development of civil wars, regional arms races, and security policies and doctrines that evolved during the Cold War yet in many ways are still with us today.

This Ceremony marks not just a conclusion, but a beginning—a “commencement” for the professionals who participated in this course, as they take their new knowledge and skills into the real world and work on developing some effective responses to these challenges.

I am pleased to be your invited speaker today because, as you well know, efforts have been underway at the UN for over six decades to eliminate nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and to regulate conventional armaments. These are among the most durable of all UN goals—they are part of our identity as an organization.

It is extraordinary how far-sighted were the post-war architects of the United Nations in recognizing not just the need to pursue both disarmament and conventional arms control goals simultaneously, while also further developing the institution’s capability to assist in the peaceful settlement of disputes and in preventing the threat and use of force. These are capabilities that were indispensable in the years after World War II. Yet they are arguably even more so today, as we consider the full implications of increasingly powerful modern weaponry in the context of chronic unresolved political disputes.

One thing, however, has not changed—the perception shared by both experts and average citizens that nuclear weapons continue to pose the gravest threats to international peace and security. Unfortunately, there are differences over which specific types of nuclear threats are most dangerous—threats from existing arsenals, threats from the proliferation of such weapons to additional States, or threats of their acquisition and use by non-state actors.
This is a useless debate, since all of these threats are both grave and global in scope, deserving a high priority by all countries. Some of these challenges are being addressed by the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), as illustrated by the successful outcomes of the 2010 NPT Review Conference and the first session this year of the Preparatory Committee for the treaty’s next Review Conference in 2015. Future efforts will focus on ensuring accountability for implementing specific commitments concerning disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

There also remains much unfinished business when it comes to eliminating other types of WMD through achieving universal membership in the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions. The elimination of all types of WMD would go far toward satisfying some of our most revered tenets of international humanitarian law, especially the prohibition against the indiscriminate targeting of civilians.

I do not wish to miss this opportunity here in Switzerland—the birthplace of international humanitarian law—to stress that this law applies to the use of all types of weapons, both conventional and unconventional, and will also apply to new weapons that are or may be under development. This law prohibits any deliberate targeting of non-combatant civilians—and maintaining this norm remains a heavy responsibility of all States.

I am fortunate indeed to be the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs when positive developments have been taking place not just with respect to the NPT, but also in the field of conventional arms. I am referring of course to the start this week of negotiations at the United Nations on an arms trade treaty. It is astonishing that it has taken over six decades to reach the point where such negotiations are finally underway.

Also, the world has been developing new norms—although still non-binding—to limit the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. In late August, Member States will meet at the UN to open their Review Conference on the 2001 Programme of Action against this trade.

As is the case with the whole category of conventional armaments, there are various vested interests that will continue to resist the development of legal obligations and even non-binding normative standards in these fields. Yet the overwhelming majority of States, and I believe public opinion worldwide, would welcome progress in both areas.

It would of course be irresponsible of me not to mention that there are some new initiatives underway to explore the possible development of multilateral norms in two rapidly evolving fields. I am referring to the establishment this year of two groups of governmental experts to address challenges associated with space weapons and cyber security.

It is regrettable that more such efforts are not underway to develop multilateral norms in other areas that remain essentially free of legal
restraints. This is especially apparent fielding the case of missiles—from development and testing, to production, trade, and use—and this applies both to offensive and defensive missiles. The same is true with respect to other nuclear weapon delivery systems, notably long-range bombers and missile submarines.

As I look over the progress made in all these various fields in recent years, and consider the delicate and challenging work that remains ahead, I can come to only one conclusion. However one considers our present circumstances, this is a superb time for any graduate with expertise in WMD disarmament and non-proliferation or in regulating conventional arms to enter these fields or to acquire new skills in addressing such challenges.

So let me congratulate the Geneva Centre for Security Policy for all it has done, and is continuing to do, in deepening our collective understanding of the dangerous world around us, and in exploring new measures to achieve peace and security. I ask all of you to recall not just the warning of catastrophe issued by H.G. Wells—but also his words that followed, “Yet, clumsily or smoothly, the world, it seems, progresses and will progress.”

Please accept my best wishes for the success of your own efforts to achieve new progress in disarmament in the years ahead.