OPENING STATEMENT

By

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24th UN Conference on Disarmament Issues
Creating a Peaceful and Safe Future:
Pressing Issues and Potential Solutions

Shizuoka City, Japan
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Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr. Kenta Wakabayashi, Mayor of the Shizuoka City Dr. Nobuhiro Tanabe, Deputy Mayor of Hiroshima City Mr. Atsuro Sasaki, Ambassadors, ladies and gentlemen.

I welcome this opportunity to open the 24th United Nations Conference on Disarmament Issues, held this year in this beautiful city of Shizuoka.

On behalf of all participants, please allow me to express my deep appreciation to Mayor Tanabe and people of Shizuoka for their warm welcome and hospitality.

Many who live outside Japan may not know that Shizuoka is known for its long history and rich culture dating back as early as 400 BC. It also boasts of its beautiful landscapes, its rich agriculture, and its thriving fishing industry. I was assured that your green tea is renowned and that your mikan mandarins are alone worth a long voyage to Japan.

I was also told that your Prefecture and City boast of many Japanese celebrities, including Princess Akishino. It is an honour for our participants to share in your culture.

By deciding to host this UN Conference, Shizuoka City has demonstrated the strong commitment of its citizens and Municipal Government to world peace and security. Your citizens appreciate the importance of promoting new progress in disarmament and non-proliferation, and in cultivating a culture of peace throughout the world. Here today in Shizuoka City, the global and the local are together and in harmony.

I also wish to pay my respects to the Government of Japan for hosting and supporting this conference series over the last twenty-four years and for its many dedicated efforts to promote international security and disarmament. Last year, Japan’s annual nuclear disarmament resolution in the General Assembly received 174 votes in favour, its largest ever. Over many years, Japan has launched a number of important disarmament and non-proliferation initiatives.

Recent examples include its work in co-chairing both the Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative and the International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament. Japan’s Special Communicators for a World without Nuclear Weapons have been bringing the testimonies of the hibakusha to global audiences. And Japan has long promoted disarmament and non-proliferation education, as well as efforts to address regional security challenges, including the DPRK nuclear issue.

With such a record, it is not surprising that this annual conference series would become an internationally-recognized forum for constructive dialogue on pressing issues on the international disarmament agenda. Participants include policy-makers, public officials, scholars, as well as members of civil society and the mass media—who attend in their personal capacity. Because of the open and informal settings of these Conferences, all stakeholders can exchange views on some of the greatest international security challenges. These gatherings are also open to the public and have proved effective in generating public interest in disarmament issues.
Our Conference agenda covers a broad range of disarmament and security issues under the theme of “Creating a peaceful and safe future: pressing issues and potential solutions”.

Aided by concerns voiced by the International Committee of the Red Cross over the horrible effects of nuclear weapons and their implications for international humanitarian law, many disarmament initiatives are underway to address these concerns. This was apparent at the 2010 NPT Review Conference and at the first session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 NPT Review Conference, when a new group of States was formed to advance this approach.

Many States have raised similar concerns in the General Assembly’s First Committee. Several issues have been identified, including—the risks to human security from the possession and possible use of nuclear weapons; the lessons to be learned from the disarmament processes on landmines and cluster munitions; and the current state of international law, especially international humanitarian law, as it applies to nuclear weapons. All merit close attention.

We face a number of challenges to the multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation regimes, as seen in the various stalemates in the United Nations disarmament machinery, notably the CD and the UNDC, and in the lack of progress in nuclear disarmament. The next session of the NPT Preparatory Committee in Geneva will be an important opportunity for States Parties to discuss the implementation of the Action Plan adopted in 2010.

Another timely issue relates to nuclear-weapon-free zones, which have spread across virtually the entire Southern Hemisphere and into Central Asia, while Mongolia has gained international recognition of its nuclear-weapon-free status. Together, this progress marks a pivotal development in the history of disarmament and non-proliferation efforts. This growth has not stopped and will likely extend to additional areas in the years ahead.

In particular, the Secretary-General remains committed to convening the NPT-mandated Conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction, together with the three depositary States, and in consultation with the States of the region. The UN supports fully the efforts of the facilitator, Mr. Jaakko Laajava of Finland, to enable the convening of that Conference at the earliest opportunity in 2013.

Yet nuclear threats to international peace and security are not limited to those produced by nuclear weapons. This is why the United Nations has also sought to bring increased attention to the nexus between nuclear safety and nuclear security. I am pleased that the 2012 Seoul Nuclear Security Summit recognized that these twin objectives must be pursued in a synergistic manner, and the Secretary-General has shown a personal interest in advancing these goals.

Although nuclear weapons are the deadliest of all, present-day conflicts are fought largely with small arms and light weapons. They are the weapons of choice in civil wars and for terrorism, organized crime and gang warfare—and their accumulation and wide availability create instability, prolong conflicts, and facilitate human rights violations.

The successful Second Review Conference of the Programme of Action, held last year in New York, reviewed the implementation of this global framework by States. That Conference
also agreed on steps to further strengthen the implementation of the Programme of Action and the International Tracing Instrument before the next Review Conference meets in 2018. The next major global meeting on small arms—the Fifth Biennial Meetings of States—will be held in 2014 and this will be followed by other important meetings in the years to follow.

With respect to the larger issue of conventional arms regulation, the absence of a global Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) only increases the risks that weapons and ammunition will be acquired and used for illicit purposes.

The world community has worked for the past six years to pursue the negotiation of such a treaty. Although the 2012 ATT Conference was unable to reach agreement on a final text, States remain committed to these negotiations. The Final United Nations Conference on the Arms Trade Treaty is scheduled to take place six weeks from now. The designation of this conference as “final” is a clear indication of Member States' intention to bring the ATT process to a conclusion. The Secretary-General has strongly supported the goal of concluding such a treaty, which would serve the interests of peace, security, and prosperity.

Regardless of whether one is considering conventional arms control or the elimination of WMD, civil society continues to play vital roles—in raising awareness; in appealing to the public conscience; and in strengthening accountability for fulfilling disarmament commitments. The contributions by the younger generation are especially important and I am very pleased that our Conference is devoting a session featuring presentations and discussions on peace and disarmament studies by university students. The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs has a long tradition of partnership with civil society and I look forward to this part of our Conference in particular.

Finally, in a world that runs on information and global connectivity, there is a pressing need to use these technologies to combat ignorance, complacency and a culture of violence. These challenges can be countered through sustained efforts to promote disarmament and non-proliferation education. With nuclear arsenals numbering in the thousands and the global threat of the proliferation of conventional weapons, especially small arms and light weapons, there is a need to educate young and old alike about the importance of reducing and eliminating armaments. These are not responsibilities that should be entrusted to ill-informed amateurs.

In closing, I would like to note that this conference was organized by the UN’s Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific. It has conducted various peace and disarmament activities including major disarmament conferences such as this, while building the capacities of countries in need to combat illicit small arms and light weapons, and piloting disarmament education projects, especially for young people. On behalf of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, I would like to thank all countries for their financial and in-kind support and assistance to the Regional Centre over the years, and count on their continued and generous support in the coming years.

Please accept my best wishes for a successful conference.