Remarks to the 60th Session of the Secretary-General’s
Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters

By

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Welcome, all of you, to Geneva. For most of you, this will be your first opportunity to participate in a session of this Board in Geneva—the home of Calvin, Voltaire, Rousseau, the League of Nations, and countless determined efforts over many decades to advance the great causes of peace and disarmament.

Even today, Geneva continues to play crucial role in international security and disarmament. The Geneva disarmament agenda remains active in both weapons of mass destruction and conventional weapons and several important forums are located here, in particular, the Conference on Disarmament, a number of treaty regimes, such as the Biological Weapons Convention, the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, the Mine Ban Treaty, and Cluster Munitions Convention, as well as the newly established Open Ended Working Group on taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations, to note just a few.

How apropos it is that the motto of this city is “Post tenebras lux”—after darkness, light. In the field of disarmament, all of us have certainly experienced the darkness. The Secretary-General is turning to his Advisory Board for some light.

And he has every reason to expect it from this particular Board. I wish to express my deep appreciation to your Chair, Desmond Bowen, for his many contributions and active involvement in the Board’s work this year.

His work has not been made any easier by various international developments, although we have seen glimmers of light in some recent headlines. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reports that global military spending continues at a stratospheric level and that just short of 20,000 nuclear weapons remain, many on high-alert status. This situation is worsened by long-term, well-funded plans for “modernization” of existing arsenals, and the lack of such plans for achieving nuclear disarmament. And in 2013, we still see nuclear weapons deployed in non-nuclear-weapon States.

Yet anybody who cites such facts must also recognize that they do not tell the whole story. The stubborn persistence of nuclear disarmament efforts has shown no signs of yielding to these developments. In a sense, support for nuclear disarmament has itself become a “fact on the ground”—a genie that will never be placed back into a bottle.

Nobody can possibly read the final report of the 2010 NPT Review Conference and conclude that the world community no longer cares about nuclear disarmament. A third of its 64-point action plan addresses this issue. A process is now underway by its States Parties to review implementation of
commitments made under this treaty. An Open Ended Working Group is working here to consider ways of taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations.

Given the long-lasting stalemate in the Conference on Disarmament and lack of progress in the UN Disarmament Commission, this Group provides a forum for substantive and comprehensive discussions on multilateralism in nuclear disarmament. The frank and open brainstorming which marked the group’s commencement of work is promising and was highly appreciated despite the absence of some key nuclear powers. The group will meet again this week and in August to consider proposals and its report to the General Assembly.

In the field of conventional arms, we are meeting in the wake of the adoption of the Arms Trade Treaty, a truly historic document that commits its parties to taking concrete steps to prevent the illicit trade and use of conventional arms against civilian populations. There is a distinctly “humanitarian” theme woven into this treaty that pertains to the need to respect the right to life of innocent civilian populations.

The Board will be focusing in this session on two issues: the relations between nuclear-weapon-free zones in advancing regional and global security, and disarmament and security implications of emerging technologies. I cannot possibly address the former without commenting on the global disappointment over the postponement of the Middle East conference on establishing a zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction in that region. The notion that the presence of WMD in the Middle East and peace in the Middle East are compatible is simply delusional. In the long run, the choice ultimately becomes one of a region full of WMD versus a region free of WMD. The more one thinks about this, the more compelling becomes the solution proposed in the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

You are also facing the challenge of emerging technologies. How astonishing it is that what we once thought of as “science fiction” has now become a contemporary security concern. Progress in science and technologies cannot be stopped, but could be shaped to serve humanity and prevent future catastrophes. From recent developments, one could anticipate that killer robots are rapidly moving beyond the realm of science fiction to technological fact. Hence, mankind has the unique opportunity to take pre-emptive action. But will it take it? And what should it do? This is why we have this Board.

I welcome a broad public debate to study potential developments in this field and
generate an in-depth analysis of the legal, technical, political, military and moral aspects and impact of the militarization/weaponization of the newly emerging technologies and the use of fully autonomous weapon systems. Such a debate should lead at further strengthening of international humanitarian law and protecting the civilians from the effects of these weapons.

I know that the issues you are deliberating are not easy. Frankly, that is why they were given to you. Your advice is not only solicited. It has the potential to change history. Is there any better reason to join this Board?