Remarks to the Open-Ended Working Group on Taking Forward Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament Negotiations

By

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I both welcome and regret this opportunity to address the Open Ended Working Group on Taking Forward Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament Negotiations.

I welcome this honour because this Working Group has an excellent opportunity—especially under the competent stewardship of its chairman, Ambassador Dengo—to revitalize the pursuit of global nuclear disarmament and I am pleased to do all I can to contribute to that great cause. Your discussions have already proven to be thought-provoking and highly informative.

And yet I also regret that we have been brought to this juncture. Nuclear disarmament efforts throughout the UN disarmament machinery—in the Disarmament Commission, the General Assembly’s First Committee, and certainly in the Conference on Disarmament—have been a huge disappointment throughout the post-Cold War era, and this is a view shared throughout the world. The problem is not just that disarmament has not occurred, but we are witnessing instead various forms of nuclear re-armament, as seen in the long-term modernization plans now underway to improve nuclear weapons, their delivery systems, and the nuclear weapons production infrastructures, all predicated on the ostensible value of nuclear weapons as instruments of deterrence and the “ultimate guarantee” of security. Such claims not only jeopardize disarmament but invite proliferation, as more and more countries seek their own ultimate guarantees. After all, are only some states to be secure?

If the process of fulfilling nuclear disarmament commitments had been functioning smoothly, there would have been no reason to establish this Working Group. In its explanation last May of the reasons for creating it, Austria stated that there was a need to bridge a significant gap between perceptions of nuclear-weapon States and non-nuclear-weapon States on the urgency and indicators of progress in nuclear disarmament. There is a clear and overwhelming need for concrete proposals to bridge this gap and to expand the common ground upon which all States can expand their cooperation leading to a world free of nuclear weapons.

I am very pleased that the meetings of the Working Group—even without the participation of the nuclear-weapon States—have not pursued the course of merely criticizing such States for failing to implement their disarmament commitments. The Chair and participating delegations have clearly recognized that such an approach would go nowhere. Instead, the Working Group has taken a big step forward in bringing democracy to
disarmament—by opening up its deliberations to all States and by inviting participation by individuals and groups from civil society. There is a refreshing element of what might be called “due process” in the deliberations of this Working Group—a healthy recognition that open participation is a very important factor in strengthening the legitimacy of global nuclear disarmament efforts. Ultimately, the legitimacy of disarmament rests both upon the right of all States to participate in its pursuit, and upon the substantive fairness or equity of the goals being sought—in this case, the elimination and prohibition of nuclear weapons not just in some places, but in all places. This is not a field that can allow double standards. Zero must mean zero.

While some members of this Working Group might view the nuclear-weapon States as opposed to disarmament, I suspect that the predominant view is that they are indispensable participants in this process. Since they too have made commitments to pursue nuclear disarmament, what is obviously needed now is a regular process of accountability to ensure that the policies and behaviour of these States are fully consistent with those commitments. The various “report cards” that have been generated in recent years by civil society are a constructive step in the right direction, as are various roadmaps adopted in consensus Final Documents at the NPT Review Conferences in 2000 and 2010. Accountability is a very large part of the raison d’être of the whole NPT review process, and a similar process of accountability is at work in the annual deliberations on nuclear disarmament resolutions in the First Committee.

Most important of all will be clear evidence that nuclear disarmament commitments are being rooted and reflected in domestic laws, policies, and regulations. This means much more than mere paper policies—disarmament plans and milestones are needed, and these in turn require institutional backing in the form of disarmament agencies and specialized laboratories, as well as support in the legislature. Progress will also require disarmament to be integrated into military doctrines, strategies, and training—in other words, disarmament must become a security policy, a national defence posture. When disarmament shifts from being a rhetorical or global aspirational goal and is instead internalized as a high national policy priority on all these levels, then we will know that real progress is being made.

In the meantime, there is definitely a need for subsidiary organs of the General Assembly like this Open-Ended Working Group to explore ways of advancing disarmament. I very much look forward to reading your final report and know it will make a very positive contribution to
the General Assembly’s ability to fulfil its Charter mandates of considering principles and making recommendations in the field of disarmament. I think it will also serve a constructive role as preparations continue for the High Level meeting of the General Assembly on nuclear disarmament to be held this year on 26 September.

You have the opportunity to shift the fulcrum of the entire debate over nuclear weapons. While the nuclear strategists continue to talk about nuclear weapons effects as falling on a spectrum of what they call “rubble, gravel, and dust”, your deliberations have helped to place a human face on those effects. I noted that the first line of resolution 67/56 which created this Working Group stated that the General Assembly was “deeply concerned about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons”.

Probably one of the most difficult tasks for this Open-Ended Working Group is to open minds. Your brainstorming and informal interactive sessions have the potential to do just that. For this reason—and to help in re-assuring a concerned public that disarmament really does remain a high priority of a vast majority of States throughout the world community—I wish all delegations success in your deliberations.